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Reclaiming unwanted things: alternative consumption practices, social change and the everyday

FODEN, Michael

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Reclaiming unwanted things:
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Michael Foden

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Abstract

This study looks at ways of acquiring, using and disposing of goods 'outside' the formal economy, focusing on three examples of *reclamation practices*: (1) giving and receiving goods free of charge via online reuse networks; (2) collecting and redistributing unwanted fruit from public and private spaces; and (3) reclaiming discarded food from supermarket bins. A central concern is with the relationship between everyday life and social change: how can engagement in these alternative yet mundane practices be conceptualised as a way to secure wider change? The research engages with and contributes to several intersecting debates, including: the relationship between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' economies; understandings of how new ways of doing things become adopted and spread; and interactions between values and practices.

These issues are explored from a *practice* perspective. Analytical focus shifts from the attitudes and preferences of detached rational individuals to the social organisation of practices and the engagement of embodied social actors with those practices. Attention is paid to the lives of practices and their practitioners: how different social patterns of activity emerge and evolve; and how these become integrated into people's lives. In considering the lives of reclamation practices, analysis draws on participant observation, interviews and documentary sources. Moving on to the lives of practitioners, in-depth interview material takes centre stage, detailing how participants made sense of their engagement in these practices, how they became engaged, how engagement has been sustained and how it fits alongside other everyday practices.

Findings can be summarised with respect to two analytical framings of reclamation practices, (1) as alternative consumption practices and (2) as a form of ordinary prefigurative politics. First, the research highlights the messy, overlapping nature of 'alternative' and 'mainstream' economic practices. On the one hand, aspects of capitalist social relations and market valuations continued to play a (problematic) role. On the other hand, concerns with saving money were not straightforwardly utility maximising and rarely existed in isolation from other-oriented social and environmental concerns. Second, the study adds to understandings of everyday practices as expressions of ordinary prefigurative politics, whereby prevailing social arrangements are subject to change by people acting differently. It sheds light on how people come to act differently, seldom a simple response to new information. Involvement in new practices was often a continuation and extension of existing activities. Introduction to new practices came about through interpersonal relationships and/or was prompted by changes in material circumstances. Both were important in practices becoming established in everyday life, as well as fitting alongside other ongoing commitments. Competing forms of value and values were negotiated in navigating between potential ways of acting. Conversely, ongoing engagement in practices helped shape the ways people valued things.

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Contents

Chapter one: introduction

1.1 Overview

In this thesis I look at ways of acquiring, using and disposing of goods 'outside' the formal economy. More specifically I focus on *reclamation practices*, whose advocates seek variously to reduce waste, connect people and/or experiment with non-monetary mechanisms of exchange, at the same time as meeting day-to-day material needs.

Underlying the research is a concern with the relationship between everyday life and social change, and with various interactions of the radical and the ordinary. Put simply, how can engagement in these alternative yet mundane practices be conceptualised as a way of bringing about wider positive change, in terms of both how people relate to each other at a local level and a series of broader social and environmental issues? Along the way I engage with and contribute to a number of further debates, concerning: the relationship between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' economies; our understandings of how new ways of doing things become adopted and spread (or fail to do so); and the interactions between values and practices, that is, between what matters to people and what they do.

These areas of contribution emerge from first considering three more concrete research questions. First, what are the key defining features of reclamation practices, how are they distinct from, and in what ways do they overlap with, other ways of acquiring and disposing of goods? Second, why do people engage in these practices? And third, how did these alternatives come to be part of their ordinary day-to-day lives?

In answering these questions my research focuses on three particular examples of reclamation practices. *Free online reuse exchange* refers to giving and receiving second-hand goods, free of charge, via an online communication mechanism. *Urban fruit harvesting* entails collecting surplus or unwanted fruit, growing in public spaces or in private gardens, and distributing it to people who can use it. *Skipping* (often called 'dumpster diving' in North America) means

salvaging discarded goods, especially food, usually from supermarket bins and typically without the owner's permission.

1.2 Eleven words and a colon: a throwaway title?

An unexpectedly challenging task in writing up the research was deciding on a title, attempting to distil the essence of several intersecting lines of enquiry and trains of thought into a maximum of 12 words. I had to choose a combination of words that would *allude* to these multiple strands, and the wider debates in which they sit, albeit imperfectly and concealing much of the underlying complexity. In practice this was an invaluable process in focusing the mind on what the thesis is really about.

In this section, then, I briefly reflect on the choice of words in the title. I aim to clarify some of the terms used in the thesis and acknowledge their contested nature. In the process I pre-empt a number of specific debates that recur in the study and, more broadly, begin to articulate an orientation to tirelessly problematising the taken-for-granted, which it is hoped characterises my approach to the study.

Reclaiming unwanted things

Empirically, this is a study about reclamation practices: ways of acquiring, repurposing and using goods that would otherwise go to waste. More specifically, and reflecting Watson and Lane's (2011: 133) understanding of the related term 'reuse', each of the three practices included in my research involves exchange: the objects concerned change hands in the act of being reclaimed.

I chose the word 'reclaiming' for its versatility. It is broad enough to describe the three practices at the heart of the empirical research – giving and receiving via reuse groups, collecting and redistributing surplus fruit, salvaging discarded food from bins – as well as covering a number of related activities that participants often saw as inseparable: buying and selling second hand goods, sorting household waste for collection, and so on. Reclaiming is shorthand for reusing, renewing, refashioning and recycling.

Moreover, reclaiming connotes something subversive and empowering. It implies taking back, making something one's own. It calls to mind, to give a few examples: the ordinary yet inventive use of objects and images to deflect the power of seemingly dominant cultures (de Certeau, 1984); political struggles over language and identity, charging formerly pejorative labels with positive self-identification (Butler, 1997; Rand, 2014); asserting autonomous, collective ownership of spaces, free from cars and from capital (Jordan, 1998; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006); and, of particular relevance to the present study, 'taking back' the economy by challenging how it is represented and enacted (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). In this sense, reclaiming stands for reappropriating, rerouting (or *détournement*), reframing and reimagining.

Implicit in the idea of reclamation (of goods) is that people value things differently. This immediately raises the question of what it means for things to be 'wanted' and 'unwanted': one person's unwanted things are, in many cases, worth a great deal to somebody else. Similarly, a given object might be valued to a greater or lesser extent at different stages in its life (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). And, more broadly, the classification of things as wanted or unwanted, as clean or unclean, as treasured possession or as rubbish, is not solely a function of inherent properties of those objects, but depends on context-specific cultural conventions (Douglas, 2002; Strasser, 1999).

Recent research into disposal practices has added further nuance to these familiar themes. Gregson et al. (2007a: 684) distinguish between outright 'unwanted things' and a whole series of 'troublesome or ambivalent presences in our homes'. Troublesome things may or may not become unwanted things; in the meantime they are a source of regret, unease and anxiety. Furthermore, even amongst those objects earmarked for disposal there is significant variation. Different channels are chosen for recirculating, handing down or throwing away different types of goods, differently valued according to socially-constructed 'meaning frameworks' and 'their conjunctures with the particularities of certain objects' materialities' (Gregson et al., 2007b: 197).

Alternative consumption practices

Conceptually, this is a study of reclamation practices *framed as* alternative consumption practices. While there are some problems with this terminology, as I go on to unpack below, it usefully draws together three strands of literature that are influential in my research: on alternative economic spaces, on the sociology and geographies of consumption, and on the dynamics of social practices. Alternative consumption practices have previously been defined as 'modes of goods acquisition that do not involve obtaining new goods from formal retail outlets', that is, 'all informal and/or second-hand modes of goods acquisition' (Williams and Paddock, 2003: 312). Examples range from buying at car boot sales and second-hand shops to receiving things from family and friends.

An initial problem with the above definition is its somewhat narrow treatment of consumption, seemingly reduced to 'modes of goods acquisition'. I use the term in a broader sense, not ending at purchase, but recognising the ongoing significance of consumption through use and disposal, in meeting needs, mediating relationships and performing identity (de Certeau, 1984; Miller, 1987; 1995; Warde, 2005a; Gregson et al., 2007b). Although the particular practices at the centre of my research are defined primarily by instances of acquisition or disposal, my focus is very much on their embeddedness within participants' ongoing daily lives. As Warde suggests, 'consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice' (2005a: 137). My interest does not stop at acts of reuse, harvesting and skipping, but continues into the many other everyday practices that they interact with and enable. Similarly, I am hesitant to distinguish too strongly between consumption and, say, work or production. Reclaiming things is frequently an active and creative process, whether in physically sourcing goods, repairing and repurposing them (from mending clothes to juicing apples), or ascribing them with new meaning.

By framing reclamation practices as 'alternative' practices, I am interested in their otherness relative to what might be called the 'mainstream' economy. Free online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping can all be considered informal, nonmonetary, nonmarket, noncapitalist economic practices. Goods are found,

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taken, grown, picked, given and received (ostensibly) in the absence of money, the profit motive and wage labour. In Holloway's (2010a) terms they can be seen as examples of 'other doing'; they are moments in which people 'stop making capitalism' and experiment with different ways of operating and organising. I situate my own research amongst a body of work which seeks to identify, document and celebrate the proliferation and diversity of these other spaces and, at the same time, disrupt the paralysing image of capitalism as everywhere and all-powerful (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006a; 2006b; Williams, 2005; Leyshon et al., 2003).

The term 'alternative', however, is contested. In its favour, it poses 'a challenge to the mainstream', questioning the desirability of the status quo and offering hope of something different (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: xxii). It serves as a direct rebuttal of the Thatcherite notion that 'there is no alternative' to neoliberal capitalism (Lee and Leyshon, 2003; Fuller et al., 2010; Wright, 2010; North, 2014a). It should, nonetheless, be used with caution. The 'alternative' can be read as subordinate to the 'mainstream', existing only in its shadow or on its margins. It arguably 'reinforces a "capitalocentric" reading of the economic that positions capitalism at the centre, and consequently further mythologises capitalism as a dominant master-signifier' (White and Williams, 2016: 1).

In the absence of a satisfactory replacement descriptor that successfully decentres capitalism, I continue to use the word 'alternative', but do so wary of its dangers. The mainstream/alternative dualism, along with capitalism/noncapitalism, can be seen as part of a vital but unfinished project of articulating economic diversity: 'The familiar binaries are present but they are in the process of being deconstructed' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 616). With this in mind, an important aim of my research is to further problematise the distinction between alternative and mainstream economies, investigating their contradictions, tensions and intersections (Jonas, 2010).

Finally, I am interested in reclamation practices 'as practices'; I take a practice-oriented approach to understanding what people do and how that changes. Analytical focus is shifted from the attitudes and preferences of detached rational individuals, however free or constrained, to the social organisation of

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practices and the engagement of embodied social actors with those practices (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990; Schatzki, 1996; 2002; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005a; Shove et al., 2012). There are numerous extant versions of what have come to be known as theories of practice and I do not wed myself exclusively to a particular formulation. Central to my understanding of practices, though, is the recursive relationship between practice-as-performance and practice-as-entity, that is, between particular situated actions and the relatively enduring patterns of activity that they shape and are shaped by (Schatzki, 1996; Shove et al., 2012).

Social change and the everyday

At its broadest, this is a study about the ordinary things that people do on a day-to-day basis and their potential to bring about radical change. I use the empirical example of reclamation practices to explore the relationship between everyday life and social change, and the questions this invites. How do changes at an individual level impact on wider social practices and vice versa? How do alternatives become (or fail to become) 'normal', for individuals, for groups of people, for society at large?

I talk about social change and the everyday in two related senses. First, I am interested in how mundane everyday practices are conceptualised as opportunities for political participation. One way of thinking about the change-oriented potential of everyday actions is through the lens of political consumerism: using existing market mechanisms for political ends, selectively buying or boycotting particular 'ethical' or 'unethical' goods to communicate or withdraw support for companies and their business practices (Micheletti, 2003). This view of the politics of everyday life is popular, but does not seem the most apt to my own research, focusing on explicitly nonmarket exchange. Instead I adopt a prefigurative understanding of the everyday as political, centred on beginning to form 'the structure of the new society within the shell of the old' (IWW, 2016: 4) through practical experimentation with parallel, alternative models of organising (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Especially relevant is Holloway's (2010a: 12) insistence on the radical prefigurative potential of ordinary people and the 'barely visible transformation of [their] daily activities'. In my own

research I investigate reclamation practices not only framed as alternative consumption practices, but also framed as a site of *ordinary prefigurative politics*.

This leads to a second, more general concern with social change and the everyday: just how are people's daily activities transformed and in what sense does this relate to wider social change? I approach this empirically by considering change for both practices and their practitioners (Shove et al., 2012). On the one hand, how do different patterns of activity emerge, take root, survive and evolve? Returning to theories of practice, the roots of both reproduction and innovation are understood to lie in the aforementioned co-constitutive relationship between individual performances and their wider patterns, or practices-as-entities (Warde, 2005a). On the other hand, how do people become introduced to new practices, how are those practices adopted into their everyday routines and, in turn, how does this influence other people around them? These questions are central to the research underpinning the study and, as such, recur throughout the chapters that follow, especially in the presentation, analysis and interpretation of findings.

1.3 Thesis outline

In the previous section I introduced some key conceptual issues that will be further unpacked in due course. My attention now turns to the rest of the thesis, giving a brief chapter-by-chapter outline of its contents.

Lessons from the existing literature

Chapters 2 to 4 are primarily concerned with establishing the conceptual background to the study and exploring the relevant learning from existing theoretical and empirical investigation.

First of all, Chapter 2 introduces the context for the thesis. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen growing public concern with the social and environmental impacts of excessive consumption and its apparent underlying cultural logic of consumerism (Humphery, 2010). In particular, critics have pointed to a series of undesirable features of the contemporary 'society of consumers': that it is highly individualised; that social life is increasingly

penetrated by commoditised exchange; and that its members are routinely profligate, shaped by an economy reliant on the continual purchase, disposal and replacement of consumer goods (e.g. Bauman, 2007). At the same time, prevailing ways of sourcing, producing, distributing and consuming these goods are criticised for their part in perpetuating exploitative labour relations, ecological degradation and the depletion of scarce resources. The aim of Chapter 2 is to situate my research in relation to these narratives and a further set of accounts that problematise or add nuance to the above critiques. The point of introducing these unresolved debates is to draw attention to the complex material and discursive backdrop to the practices featured in the empirical research.

Whereas Chapter 2 covers a breadth of contextual issues, Chapters 3 and 4 home in on the central conceptual questions at the heart of the study. Chapter 3 is concerned with the politics of consumption: the connectedness of consumers with distant human and nonhuman others; and the potential of everyday consumption as a site for intervening in those connections and the often asymmetrical power relations that they entail. The aim is to explore different ways of conceptualising these connections and potential interventions, eventually arriving at an understanding of ordinary prefigurative politics as introduced briefly above. In the process I review some of the relevant existing evidence and begin to formulate the key questions and contributions for the present research.

In Chapter 4 the discussion narrows further, seeking to develop a theoretical framework for the research. Central to the prefigurative understanding of everyday political action developed in Chapter 3 is the notion that society can be changed by people acting differently. As already noted, an important question for my empirical work is how people come to act in new ways and how individual-level changes interact with collective patterns of activity. Recent government-led behaviour change interventions have tended to focus on appealing to individual knowledge and attitudes to change their behaviour. Insights from theories of practice have challenged this approach, suggesting that a fruitful alternative might turn attention to the constitution of social practices, their emergence and evolution, and how people engage with them. I

take up this challenge by detailing a practice-oriented approach to the study of reclamation practices and beginning to anticipate some of the challenges faced in implementing the approach.

Methodology and methods

Chapter 5 acts as an interface between what the existing literature has to say (Chapters 2 to 4) and the findings from my research (Chapters 6 to 9). It begins with a recap of the broad research questions identified in Chapter 3, before discussing how the practice approach detailed in Chapter 4 can be operationalised in an empirical research setting. First, I consider the epistemological and methodological implications of a theoretical orientation to 'going beyond' the subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy, highlighting a twin focus on the lives of practices and of practitioners as an attempt to do so. Second, I look at the methods most appropriate to practice-oriented research. Previous studies have been divided in their respective emphasis on in-depth interviewing, ethnography or other participatory and visual methods, but often advocate a hybrid, multi-method design. Attention then moves to the design of the empirical work, the methods chosen, the selection of participants and a series of ethical considerations, incorporating a reflexive account of 'doing the research'. Finally, I outline the procedures used to analyse the data, setting the scene for the chapters that follow.

Research findings

The next four chapters present findings from the empirical research. Chapter 6 focuses on the lives of three reclamation practices. Following Shove et al. (2012), I begin by sketching out the different constituent elements that define each of the three practices, making them identifiable as particular practices and distinguishable from other practices. In doing so I consider (amongst other things) the tools and technologies used, the rules and guidelines followed, the skills and know-how required, and the meanings expressed, in enacting a given practice. I then go on to add complexity to this simplified model by exploring both the variety of enactments within each practice and their points of connection with other practices. This draws attention to the significant overlaps and mutual influence between different ways of operating, including between

those analytically distinguished as 'alternative' and 'mainstream' economic practices. Finally, I observe how reclamation practices have emerged and taken root in new locations.

In Chapters 7, 8 and 9 the focus shifts from the emergence and development of social practices to the experiences of their practitioners. Chapter 7 asks why people engage in reclamation practices: how, in their own terms, do they make sense of their involvement? Attention is given to the multiple narratives that participants negotiate in doing so. Discussion begins with participants' immediate motivations for engaging in reclamation practices, including: cost-effectiveness and convenience; reducing waste; connecting people; challenging/avoiding prevailing market practices; and fun, excitement and conviviality. I then move on to explore participants' understandings as to the underlying significance of their engagement, from meeting material needs to making a difference in the world. Chapter 8, meanwhile, considers these different motivations and purposes in situ: how participants navigate between multiple choices on a day-to-day basis; why, in a given situation, they acquire or dispose via a particular channel, rather than through the range of other channels available. This highlights the contradictions and tensions experienced in negotiating multiple financial, practical and ethical concerns, beginning to shed light on how these competing priorities are managed in practice.

In Chapter 9 I move on to my third research question: how did participants come to be engaged in these particular alternative consumption practices or, put differently, how were they recruited to these practices? Here discussion goes beyond the reasons and rationales covered in Chapters 7 and 8, to consider the processes involved in alternative ways of acquiring and disposing of goods becoming, or failing to become, part of normal everyday life and shaping what normal means at the same time.

Discussion and conclusion

Having detailed the findings of my research, in Chapter 10 I draw out and bring together a series of original contributions to understanding, with respect to:

- free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping, as practices
- the relationship between alternative and mainstream economic practices
- the notion of everyday life as political
- the processes by which new ways of doing things become adopted and spread
- the relationship between value(s) and practices

Finally, in Chapter 11 I summarise the key messages from the thesis, before reflecting on some challenges faced and limitations of the study, including how the research design might have been improved. I finish by presenting some promising avenues for further research.

Chapter two: consumerism and its discontents

2.1 Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to introduce the context for the study. I focus especially on a series of critical narratives – about the type of society we find ourselves in and the (mostly harmful) implications of contemporary ways of consuming – that together help form the discursive backdrop to the particular practices covered by the research. On the one hand this focus reflects my own initial interests when entering into the study, in the apparent role of consumption (and consumers) in contributing to numerous social and environmental problems and also its/their potential to bring about positive change. On the other hand it establishes several key stories that are useful in seeking to understand *why people are prompted to consume in alternative ways*, pre-empting what will later emerge in the empirical findings (see especially Chapter 7).

Put differently, in embarking on a study of alternative practices it is instructive to explore what is considered wrong with the status quo, what characteristics of conventional ways of doing things are seen to be undesirable and worth striving to avoid. First, I introduce and define some key terms relating to the notion of consumerism and the consumer society (Section 2.2). I then critically consider a series of debates around purported problems with the nature of late modern or advanced capitalist society: that it is individualised (Section 2.3), commodified (Section 2.4) and wasteful (Section 2.5). Finally I note some problematic consequences associated with what we consume, its production and distribution (Section 2.6).

2.2 Consumption, consumerism and the consumer society

People have always consumed, in the sense that they have, as a minimum, needed food, clothing and shelter to survive. Consumption, then, is a 'cultural universal, a necessary aspect of human existence' (Smart, 2010: 4); it is a 'permanent and irremovable condition and aspect of life, bound by neither time nor history' (Bauman, 2007: 25). That said, it is a relatively recent development to understand and experience such a range of distinct activities *as consuming*, to combine them under the single heading 'consumption' (Clarke et al., 2003).

Originally having only a negative connotation – to consume meant 'to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust' (Williams, 1976: 68-69) – it was not until the early twentieth century that economists began to conceptualise consumption 'explicitly as the satisfaction of human needs through economic means' (Warde, 2005b: 57), this definition subsequently passing into more popular use by the middle of the century.

The term consumption, it would seem, is inherently ambivalent. Like Williams and Warde, Clarke et al. (2003: 1) note the Latin root of consumption as *consumere*, 'to use up entirely, to destroy', but also draw attention to its 'sister' word, consummation, from the Latin *consumare*, 'to sum up, to bring to completion'. Paradoxically, they suggest, consumption in its present usage conveys both of these contradictory meanings: it is at once both creative and destructive. Herein lies its 'semantic ambivalence', an unresolved tension between the pleasures – or even the emancipatory potential – of consumer choice on the one hand, and a series of catastrophic consequences, human and nonhuman, observed and anticipated, on the other, a tension which permeates this thesis and especially the present chapter.

If consumption is a timeless, universal feature of life, *consumerism* refers to something more temporally and spatially situated. It is variously understood as an attitude, an ideology or a way of life in which consuming, or being a consumer, is given particular emphasis over other activities.[1] Smart (2010: 5), for instance, defines it as 'a way of life that is perpetually preoccupied with the pursuit, possession, rapid displacement, and replacement of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of things'. As Humphery (2010) observes, whether in everyday conversation or in the discourse of social theorists, the term consumerism is almost always used pejoratively.

Among the more prolific and high-profile academic critics of consumerism is the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Importantly, in his formulation consumerism should not be understood as an attribute of individuals but of particular

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[1] A quite different meaning of consumerism to the one used here refers to advocacy movements 'seeking to promote and protect the rights of consumers' (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 9). See Hilton (2003) for more detailed discussion of consumerism in this other, outmoded sense.

societies. Much more than a personally-held attitude, it is a cultural logic, underlying the way people think and speak, and permeating social practices (Bauman, 2007). A *society of consumers* is one in which this logic is especially dominant, that is, where 'the probability is high that most men and women will embrace the consumerist rather than any other culture, and that most of the time they will obey its precepts to the best of their ability' (p.52), although they may do so largely unwittingly.

While the image of the consumer society is widespread in both social theory and popular culture (Ritzer and Slater, 2001), there is no consensus on how it is defined – what sets it apart from what came before and what might be found elsewhere – or at what point(s) in time the (Western) transition to a consumer society was made. Clarke et al. (2003) suggest a number of possible definitions: a society in which 'it increasingly *makes sense* to think of all kinds of incongruous activities as instances of "consumption"'; one in which a much greater proportion of the population than previously have the means to 'consume', as opposed to merely 'subsisting'; or one in which we are 'increasingly consumers *first and foremost* … and our principal duty is to consume' (p.27, original emphasis).

The third of these is closest to Bauman's own definition, as a society which 'engages its members primarily in their capacity as consumers' (2000: 76). Identities are no longer principally defined, it is argued, through one's occupation as in the earlier 'producer' society, but are constructed and communicated through acts of consumption. As a result they tend to be temporary and flexible, 'loosely arranged of the purchasable, not-too-lasting, easily detachable and utterly replaceable tokens currently available in the shops' (Bauman, 2005: 29). Social bonds are equally temporary and flexible, 'based on easily dissolvable one-factor ties, with no determined duration, no strings attached, and unburdened by long-term commitments' (Bauman, 2008: 121). Moreover, it is the systemic, reproductive role which consumption plays which is said to set apart today's consumer society: 'Consumption is no longer just one aspect of society amongst others. In a fully fledged consumer society, consumption performs a role that keeps the entire social system ticking over'

(Clarke, 2003: 13); wants and desires become the '*principal propelling and operating force* of society' (Bauman, 2007: 28, original emphasis).

2.3 An individualised society?

A recurring idea in accounts of consumerism, consumer societies and late modernity more broadly is that under these conditions society has become, or is becoming, increasingly individualised (e.g. Bauman, 2001a; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Definitions of individualisation vary but typically include some or all of the following: people's identities and life trajectories are no longer ready-made, prescribed by one's social position, class, gender, occupation, etc., but are increasingly up to the individual to determine; individual human subjects are increasingly free to make their own life choices; individual human subjects are increasingly *responsible* for making their own life choices and for meeting their own needs; people live increasingly separately from each other, pursuing their life projects in relative isolation and with relatively little concern for the life projects of others. Together, these issues can be summarised as, on the one hand, increased 'choice and reflexivity in identity' and, on the other, 'the privatization of social and political problems to an individual level' (Dawson, 2012: 307).

The perceived benefits and ills of apparent individualising processes have been the source of considerable disagreement, typically understood as a polarised debate between adherents of two political philosophies: liberalism and communitarianism (Etzioni, 1990; Caney, 1992). From a liberal (and subsequently neoliberal) perspective, individualisation as defined above is largely celebrated as a triumph of self-determination: the increasing freedom of men and women to make their own way in the world, unencumbered by traditional social constraints. By contrast, a communitarian perspective on the same processes would highlight a breakdown in social bonds, identify this as a source of social problems and advocate the cultivation of stronger connections between people and the re-establishment of communities. Whereas liberalism is committed to individual freedom, communitarianism prioritises the pursuit of the common good. Putnam (1995; 2000), for example, charts falling levels of civic engagement since the 1950s and a corresponding decline in what he calls

'social capital'. This refers to a (somewhat vague) cohesive force holding groups of people together, comprising 'features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (1995: 67).[2]

Individualisation past and present

Debates around individualisation did not originate in contemporary discussions of late modernity. Intertwined processes of modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation have long been implicated in both increased freedom from traditional constraints and what has been called a loss of community or a decline in group solidarity. Marx (1990 [1867]) saw the birth of the free labourer as a prerequisite for the emergence of capitalist relations of production. Unlike the slave or the serf, the labourer is free to sell his or her labour-power as a commodity on the market – meeting the buyer of that labour-power as a legal equal – but is also *compelled* to do so, with no other way to make a living, not owning the means of production. Tönnies (1963 [1887]) equated the move from traditional village and small town life to modern city life with a transition from *Gemeinschaft* ('community') to *Gesellschaft* ('society' or civil society) as predominant modes of social organisation. The former is characterised by customs, mores and religion, and by close, kinship-type relations – 'the village community and the town themselves can be considered as large families' (p.228) – the latter by more formal, associational ties, as well as by commerce, science and the rule of law. Simmel (1950 [1903]), meanwhile, was concerned with the psychological experience of modern urban life. As a coping mechanism, faced with an '*intensification of nervous stimulation*' (p.410, original emphasis), inhabitants of the metropolis cultivate a rational, rather than emotional, engagement with their environment, accompanied by indifference, reserve and mental distance from those that are physically close: 'we frequently do not even know by sight those who have been our neighbors for years'

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[2] Putnam's usage differs from Bourdieu's narrower definition of social capital as the 'actual or potential resources which are linked to … membership in a group' (1986: 248). While Putnam sees social capital as a cohesive force, for Bourdieu it is a socially-constructed and unequally distributed resource to be mobilised by individuals as they try to protect or improve their position within a given field.

(p.415). For Simmel the modern city fosters both personal freedom and anonymity.

More recent critics acknowledge this fundamental continuity between earlier and later modes of modernity – as Bauman puts it, 'casting members as individuals is the trademark of modern society' (2001a: 45) – but note an extension and intensification of individualising processes in the 20th and early 21st centuries (Beck, 1992; Lash, 1994; Bauman, 2001a). While traditional forms of solidarity were replaced in the modern city by still relatively solid modes of association – citizenship, nationality, political affiliation, class consciousness – late modernity entails a further erosion of these categories, leaving individuals increasingly isolated and responsible for making their own way in the world, expected to '*seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions*' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xxii, original emphasis). The transition from one phase of modernity into the other, Bauman argues, is marked by a shift in the settlement between freedom and security. Whereas the classically modern tendency was to exchange 'a portion of [one's] possibilities of happiness for a portion of security' (Freud, 2015 [1930]: 88), in late modernity 'the gains and the losses have changed places' (Bauman, 1997: 3): security is sacrificed in the name of freedom. In both instances, the compromise is an unsatisfactory one, yielding its own respective discontents: 'If dull and humdrum days haunted the seekers of security, sleepless nights are the curse of the free. … Freedom without security assures no more steady a supply of happiness than security without freedom' (p.3).

Correspondingly, Bauman's analysis of individualisation is more ambivalent than the polarised liberal-communitarian debate. The tension between the two is irresolvable, mirroring the always-unsatisfactory compromise between freedom and security: 'Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom' (Bauman, 2001b: 4). Thus he presents a catalogue of concerns with the nature of individualised society (three of which I now consider), but remains sceptical of communitarian promises to remedy them, especially where they valorise tradition and homogeneity as the basis for greater security.

Collateral damage: individual responsibility, indifference, and the persistence of inequality

First, Bauman notes that the responsibility for dealing with socially-produced risks and contradictions increasingly falls on individuals: 'If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute and industrious enough in following the health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job' (2001a: 47). Moreover, in late modernity they are required to face this responsibility increasingly without the solidarity and support of others in shared circumstances. In the earlier phase of modernity, those with limited resources compensated through acting collectively as a class, their individual concerns combining to form common interests. Today, by contrast, the nature of people's privately experienced problems renders them less readily joined together and less effectively tackled by collective action:

> Troubles may be similar … but unlike the common interest of yore they do *not* form a 'totality which is greater than the sum of its parts' and acquire no new quality, easier to handle, by being faced up to and confronted together. … [T]he only service that company can render is advice on how to survive in one's own irreparable solitude, and that the life of everyone is full of risks which need to be confronted and fought alone. (Bauman, 2001a: 48, original emphasis)

Similarly, Beck (1992) observes a weaker attachment to social class, and a decline in class-based collective action, in late modernity. This is, he suggests, partly explained by the successes of welfare states in guarding against absolute poverty. As a result the 'collective experience of immiseration', which Marx saw as central to the development of class struggle, has been overcome (pp.95-6). At the same time increased mobility, labour market competition and the growing importance of formal educational credentials have, since the mid-twentieth century, 'slowly disintegrated' the cultural basis and experience of class. Through individualising processes, then, social groups 'lose their distinctive traits, both in terms of their self-understanding and in relation to other groups', in turn forfeiting 'their independent identities and the chance to become a formative political force' (p.100). Instead individuals form temporary coalitions in response to specific concerns.

Second, individualisation means not only people losing their social structures of support, but also a change in the way they relate to those they come into contact with. Consumption is, in Bauman's view, a fundamentally solitary pursuit, 'even when it happens to be conducted in company' (2007: 78); members of a consumer society are 'alone even when they act together' (2005: 31). Individuals are indifferent to those around them, happy to go about their own business while others go about theirs (2001a). In both these respects, Bauman's argument recalls Simmel's (1950 [1903]: 418) reflection on the modern city, that 'one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd'. Indifference amounts to an erosion of care or what Bauman terms adiaphorisation (the process of something becoming exempt from ethical consideration): 'being with' other people without 'being for' them, being responsible to and for oneself instead of 'for the welfare, autonomy, and dignity of another human'. In sum, 'the collateral victim of the leap to the consumerist rendition of freedom is the Other as object of ethical responsibility and moral concern' (Bauman, 2008: 53).

Third, while class-based identity and solidarity have seemingly declined, there has been no parallel improvement in the relative life chances of different segments of society: inequality remains largely unchanged (Beck, 1992). Bauman goes further, arguing that individualisation leads to even greater inequality: an 'ever more profound division between the haves and the have-nots' (1997: 204). In the consumer society, freedom of choice has become the principal stratifying variable: 'choosing is everybody's *fate*, but the ranges of *realistic choices* differ, and so do the supplies of *resources* needed to make them' (p.196, original emphasis). Those without the requisite resources to choose, and to choose well, are cast as 'flawed consumers', of no use to the consumer society (Bauman, 2005). Individualised freedom is, in other words, ultimately a negative freedom: it entails the removal of formal restraints on behaviour, but only a subset of the population are endowed with the means to act on that freedom (Davis, 2008).

Questioning individualisation

Aside from debates as to the desirability or otherwise of individualising processes, others have questioned the existence, or at least the extent, of such processes. As Dawson (2012: 308) notes in his review of the main challenges to the individualisation narrative, the theories of Bauman, Beck and Giddens are typically criticised for their lack of empirical grounding, drawing too much on their own view of the world with the danger of 'universalizing a particular, middle class, experience of late modernity'.

As a 'way forward', Dawson distinguishes between what he calls disembedded and embedded theories of individualisation, identifying more readily with the latter. In its disembedded sense, accounts of individualisation foreground choice and reflexivity, implying 'the increased empowerment of individuals above and beyond previous forms of social constraint' (Dawson, 2012: 313). This perspective, Dawson argues, is 'greatly flawed', with little evidence to support it beyond the experiences of 'largely white, male, middle class' academics and their milieu. That said, it can be considered an accurate reflection of the expanding prominence of '*claims* to individuality and individual justification' if not 'a faithful depiction of how people act' (p.314, original emphasis). Embedded accounts, meanwhile, emphasise the second dimension of individualisation, that is, the 'privatization of responsibility, disguised as freedom' and marked by 'constant ambivalence and uncertainty' (p.313). Furthermore, embedded notions of individualisation more readily recognise its temporal and spatial unevenness and the continuing role played by social stratification in determining life chances.

Summing up, there is some instinctive explanatory purchase in the notion that societies are becoming increasingly individualised, at least thinking from a subject position not dissimilar to the middle class male academics that have become synonymous with that idea. The empirical evidence, however, questions the extent and spread of individualising processes, pointing especially to the continued salience of social class and gender in structuring life chances and cultural identity. The effects of individualisation appear to be uneven, in keeping with Bauman's analysis, meaning that while politics and policy-making

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may go along assuming universal freedom of choice (believing the 'disembedded' individualisation thesis), the reality for many is of having to face the increased responsibility this implies without the resources required to do so.

I now move on to consider two further features in accounts of late modern consumer society, first, that it is marked by the increasing penetration of the commodity (Section 2.4) and, second, that it is founded on a culture of disposal (Section 2.5).

2.4 A commodified society?

Foundational to Bauman's definition of the consumer society is that its members are, above all else, consumers. Their identities and relationships – aspects of people's lives previously relatively secure and unchanging, determined by tradition, by belonging to a particular locality or social group, or by employment – now require constant maintenance; they must be continually reshaped and refreshed. This is achieved primarily through purchasing commodities, that is, goods and services produced for sale: 'The roads to self-identity, to a place in society, to life lived in a form recognizable as that of meaningful living, all require daily visits to the market place' (Bauman, 2005: 26). Moreover, in doing so consumers are themselves transformed into commodities, 'expected to make themselves available on the market and to seek, in competition with the rest of the members, their most favourable "market value"' (2007: 62). When they consume, ostensibly to meet their needs or satisfy their desires, they are also investing in the 'tools and raw materials' through which they can make themselves 'market-worthy' and so secure (for the moment) their 'social membership' and self-esteem (pp.56-7, 62).

For Bauman, the centrality of consumption to contemporary life, of living always in the role of the consumer, is undesirable in two ways. First, as highlighted earlier, late modern societies are stratified by freedom of choice: the distribution of the resources with which to make market choices is profoundly unequal. In a society whose members are principally consumers, those lacking the material and cultural means to consume – and to consume correctly – are excluded and stigmatised, cast as 'flawed consumers', inadequate and unwanted (Bauman, 2005). Second, even for those able to make the requisite 'daily visits to the

market place', the relentlessness of the task is exhausting, unsatisfying and anxiety-provoking, 'a never-ending and uphill struggle' (2007: 60). The enjoyment of particular acts of consumption is fleeting, soon overcome by longing for the next one. Any gains made in one's social worth are only ever temporary and must, before long, be won all over again. According to Juliet Schor (1993), in her classic study of increased working hours in the US, this leads to an 'insidious cycle of "work and spend"'(p.9). In spite of technical advances predicted to reduce working hours, middle class Americans find themselves on a 'consumerist treadmill', working more and more to pay for their ever-inflating needs and wants.

This second point, connecting the anxiety inherent in consumption and the immediate loss of interest in objects of desire once they are attained, is open to challenge on two counts. Warde (1994) questions the assumption that consumption is anxiety-provoking, arguing that many people do not experience the theorised weight of responsibility to continually choose and to choose well. Miller (1987), meanwhile, questions the instantaneity of consumption. Purchase is only 'the start of a long and complex process' (p.190) whereby abstract commodities become adopted and particularised, constituting and expressing identity and relationships.

Bauman's portrayal of a society 'reshaped in the likeness of the market-place' (2007: 57), of 'the conquest, annexation and colonization of life by the commodity market' (p.62), fits into wider debates around the role of the market economy and its logic in late modernity. A dominant narrative, amongst both those in favour of extending the market's reach and those who seek to resist it, is what Williams (2005) terms the commodification thesis. Typically this familiar story begins with an assumption that all economic activity – essentially all exchange of goods and services between people – can be categorised into one of three modes: market, state and community. The commodification thesis holds that, historically, the proportion of economic activity which fits into the first of these categories – the market economy, and especially capitalist commodity production – has increased and is increasing. More and more areas of economic activity, broadly defined, from trade in consumer goods and the delivery of public services to domestic provisioning and homemaking, are

thought to be undertaken following the model of the capitalist commodity, that is monetised and profit-oriented exchange. In summary:

> A view predominates that the market is becoming more powerful, expansive, hegemonic and totalizing as it penetrates deeper into each and every corner of economic life and stretches its tentacles ever wider across the globe to colonize those areas previously left untouched by its powerful force. (Williams, 2005: 1)

However, Williams contends that the commodification thesis, although widespread, is grounded in 'the flimsiest of evidence' (2005: 2); his aim is to subject it to thorough empirical investigation. He does so by measuring the size of the commodity economy – meaning profit-motivated monetised exchange – in comparison to various forms of non-commodified work, including non-exchanged work (subsistence work), non-monetised exchange, and not-for-profit monetised exchange.[3] The upshot is that 'in the heartlands of commodification – the advanced "market" economies – a non-commodified sphere is not only as large as the commodified sphere but also growing relative to it' (p.7). Furthermore, as with processes of individualisation, there is evidence to suggest that, where commodification has occurred, it has done so unevenly along socio-economic, geographical and gender lines.

Again, as was the case in considering individualising processes, the common-sense assumption that late modern societies are dominated by market expansion does not unproblematically stand up to empirical scrutiny.

2.5 A throwaway society?

One further feature of the consumer society, according to Bauman's critique, is its inherent wastefulness. Large concentrations of people have always faced the problem of how to manage their rapid accumulations of rubbish (Melosi, 2005; Kennedy, 2007). Levels of refuse generation have, however, risen sharply since the middle of the twentieth century, reflecting an increase in the overall quantity of goods consumed, as well as changes in product design and how things are packaged for sale (Gandy, 1994; Zapata Campos and Hall, 2013). The present

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[3] This task is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, Section 3.6.

scale of waste has been well-documented in popular literature and mainstream media, accompanied by a proliferation of images – from 'fridge mountains' in the UK to informal waste recovery workers in the Global South – and supported by a series of alarming, if difficult to comprehend, statistics.

As already observed, Bauman is especially interested in how identities are constructed and social relations are mediated through successive acts of consumption, specifically through repeatedly buying, discarding and replacing commodities. In particular he emphasises the temporary, provisional and ever-changing nature of these identities and relationships, and the corresponding need for a continual turnover of goods. Satisfaction, for ideal or 'fully fledged' members of the consumer society, is both instant and instantaneous, a situation 'best achieved if the consumers cannot hold their attention nor focus their desire on any object for long' (Bauman, 2005: 25). As a result, durability is no longer a highly prized attribute; the sooner an item can be thrown away, the sooner new desires can be cultivated to 'fill the void left by the hopes already discredited and discarded' (2007: 48). Similarly, Strasser (1999) is concerned with an unprecedented 'veneration of newness' (p.5) and its role in the emergence of a 'throwaway culture replac[ing] one grounded in reuse' (p.18). More than ever before:

> …we discard stuff simply because we do not want it. We buy things devised to be thrown out after brief use ... [and] declare clothes and household goods obsolete owing to changing tastes. (Strasser, 1999: 4)

The attachment of the adjective 'throwaway' to contemporary societies and cultures can be traced at least to the 1950s. It was not always used negatively. A short piece on 'Throwaway Living' in a mid-fifties issue of *Life* magazine (1955) is a case in point, unreserved in praising the impact of disposable household goods on domestic work. Sharing the page was an advert for constipation relief, presumably only inadvertently reinforcing the celebration of newly unrestricted waste flows and their liberating effects. Soon after, however, Packard's (1961) bestseller *The Waste Makers* was influential in linking disposability to a critique of consumerism. Haunted by the 'specter of glut' (p.3) – the threat of the population's consumptive capacity failing to keep up with

increases in manufacturing productivity – marketing professionals are called upon to 'stimulate greater desire and to create new wants' (p.23). Smart notes the same anxiety as early as the 1920s: 'the problem before us today is not how to produce the goods, but how to produce the customers' (Strauss [1924], cited in Smart, 2010: 24).

Beyond the private concerns of producers and retailers, politicians and policy makers are also, in Packard's view, deeply invested in this stimulation of demand, being preoccupied with growth. The health of the economy is seen as dependent on the willingness of consumers to continue spending. The people 'must be induced to step up their individual consumption higher and higher, whether they have any pressing need for the goods or not. Their ever-expanding economy demands it' (Packard, 1961: 6). Packard goes on to document a series of strategies employed by marketers, the 'waste makers' of his title, designed to 'make Americans in large numbers into voracious, wasteful, compulsive consumers' (p.25). At the heart of these are the inculcation of a 'throwaway spirit', openly celebrating the convenience of disposability, and its more surreptitious companion 'planned obsolescence', designing goods to physically fail or, more effectively, rendering still-functional goods no longer desirable: 'wear[ing] the product out in the owner's mind' (p.68).

Subsequent accounts of consumerism and the consumer society have continued to highlight the role played by disposal in sustaining economic growth. In Baudrillard's analysis waste is functional, providing 'the economic stimulus for mass consumption'. Goods are produced not primarily for their utility or durability but 'with *an eye to [their] death*'. Advertising exists 'with the sole aim not of adding to the use-value of objects, but of *subtracting value from them*, of detracting from their time-value by subordinating them to their fashion-value and to ever earlier replacement' (1998: 46, original emphasis). For Bauman, 'the consumerist economy thrives on the turnover of commodities … and whenever money changes hands, some consumer products are travelling to the dump' (2007: 36). The cultivation of perpetual dissatisfaction and the resulting urge to dispose and replace is 'just what is needed if the gross national product is to grow' (p.37). Waste is 'a direct corollary of the objective at the

center of consumer society, to continually increase the supply of commodities' (Smart, 2010: 165).

Once more, empirical research casts doubt on the portrayal of late modern society, this time as one characterised by, and celebratory of, the ubiquity of carefree disposal. Gregson et al. (2007a) call into question the notion of the throwaway society, pointing to the number of different ways that people deal with things they no longer want, in addition to via the waste stream. Their participants 'went to considerable lengths to pass things on, hand them around, and sell them' (p.683), testifying to 'the pervasive presence of secondhand and hand-me-down/around economies' (p.682). Even when things are thrown away, their evidence suggests that this is anything but carefree; it is enacted with 'care and concern, guilt, and anxiety' (p.684), frequently constituting and expressing loving relationships with other people. Similarly, as Evans (2012a; 2014) observes in relation to food disposal, participants routinely bought more food than they could eat, and ended up throwing significant quantities away, but rarely disposed of food without being concerned about doing so. The research highlights a number of socially-produced anxieties negotiated by households, especially relating to enacting the role of a loving parent or generous provider. Most commonly this meant a pressure to cook and to eat 'properly', with a strong emphasis on fresh ingredients and constant variety, while ever-aware of food hygiene and the perceived dangers of eating food which is 'past its best' (2014: 47). Finally, numerous studies have pointed to ongoing efforts to capture the value in things after they have been discarded and often in places distant from their site of disposal (Gregson et al., 2010; Lepawsky and Billah, 2011; Lepawsky and Mather, 2011; Crang et al., 2013).

2.6 Consequences of consumption

So far in this chapter I have introduced, and begun to problematise, three common criticisms of late modern societies: that they are highly individualised, predominantly commodified and inherently wasteful. By turning to disposal I have also alluded to a further set of concerns, not directly with the kind of society we inhabit, but with the undesirable and unintended by-products of *how* we consume. If economic growth relies on a continual turnover of goods, this

not only implies an ever-increasing accumulation of waste matter to be managed, but also draws attention to the people employed in the production of those goods, the material resources used up, and the environmental impacts throughout the process, from extraction of raw materials to distribution of finished products.

Social and environmental considerations like these have become prominent in popular representations of consumption. Lewis and Potter (2011) observe an 'ethical turn in mainstream consumerism' (p.6) through which the vocabulary of ethics, responsibility and conscience is 'increasingly entering into the everyday language as well as the shopping experiences and practices of so-called "ordinary" consumers' (p.4). More specifically, there has been a growing concern with 'political and ethical questions surrounding the origins and production of goods' (Reimer and Leslie, 2004: 250) and 'a greater awareness and questioning of the intricate relationships between people, places and commodities' (Hughes and Reimer, 2004: 1). In other words, consumers are more interested in where their things come from, in what circumstances they are made, and how their consuming connects them to these often distant origins.

2.7 Conclusions

In this chapter I have introduced a set of contested debates that are central to understanding the emergence of alternative consumption practices. Critics of late modern society, framed as a society of consumers, lament what they observe to be processes of growing individualisation and commodification, alongside rising social inequalities, a weakening of collective action and the decline of ethical responsibility for human and nonhuman others. Meanwhile, increasing levels of consumption are implicated in exploitative labour relations, ecological degradation and the depletion of scarce resources, exacerbated by an apparent impulse to regularly dispose of, and replace, rapidly obsolescent goods.

Other commentators, despite often sharing the same normative concerns as the above critics, question both the empirical accuracy of such assertions and their desirability in seeking to counter the trends that they purport to observe. By

emphasising the contingency and only partial realisation of processes such as individualisation and commodification, these latter accounts provide an antidote to the fatalism that can be read into grand narratives of historical change. They identify glimpses of possibility and hope, spaces of resistance (intentional or otherwise) to developments that totalising depictions of a consumer society, of a neoliberal order, or even of capitalism as the dominant economic system, can portray as inevitable.

My intention in this thesis is not to establish the veracity of these critiques and/or their counterarguments, or to attempt to measure the extent to which the problems identified have become reality. I raise them here primarily by way of context, to introduce some of the narratives that research participants employ (and problematise, and live in tension with) in seeking to make sense of their own engagement in alternative consumption practices. In the process I have pre-empted a number of conceptual concerns that run throughout the analysis and discussion: with notions of individual freedom and social constraint, introduced in historical context via the individualisation thesis, but central to key sociological debates around agency and structure; with the relationship between individual acts of consumption and their wider consequences; and with ways of thinking about the continuities and discontinuities between capitalist and noncapitalist economic spaces. Over the following two chapters I return to these issues with more theoretical rigour.

Chapter three: the politics of consumption

3.1 Introduction

Consumption is inherently political. It is political in two senses. First, as Chapter 2 noted, the circulation of goods intimately connects the everyday lives of consumers with those of socially, spatially and/or psychologically distant others, human and nonhuman, from people employed in production to the physical environment. Second, consumption can also be understood as an arena for active political participation, for intervening in and reconfiguring these connections and their often asymmetrical power relations.

The aim of this chapter is to theorise these connections and potential interventions. I begin by asking how best to conceptualise the linkages between people, places and things that arise from the movement of commodities. In Section 3.2 I explore the imagery of the commodity chain, connecting production and consumption in a linear sequence of processes and places, and its uses in uncovering the material reality behind the things we consume. In Section 3.3, however, I explore some critical engagements with this perspective, especially highlighting its limited account of consumption, its simple linearity and its assumption that hidden truth can be unproblematically exposed, while reflecting on the merits of some refinements to the model.

In the second half of the chapter I consider everyday (consumption) practices as a site for enacting politics. In what ways does it make sense to think of mundane moments of leisure, or patterns of household provisioning, as potentially constituting political action? And how is it imagined that such acts might lead to a positive outcome? In Section 3.4 I introduce one well-trodden route to understanding consumer politics, under the rubric of political (or ethical) consumerism: appealing to business interests via the marketplace, selectively spending and withholding money to show support for, or withdraw it from, supply practices deemed ethical or unethical, and therefore in the process adapting existing market means to political ends.

In Section 3.5 I change focus to a series of alternative understandings of the everyday as political, through actions seeking to reappropriate or subvert

mainstream economic mechanisms, avoid them altogether and/or create new ones in parallel.[4] I highlight a discursive element to this form of politics, in which documenting economic plurality is itself part of reconfiguring problematic social relations. Section 3.6 reviews some of the existing academic work contributing to that ongoing project. The chapter ends with important insights and questions raised by this body of work and where my own study fits within it.

3.2 Conceptualising commodity connections

Exploring the consequences of consumption means articulating the *connections* between seemingly isolated, benign acts of private consumption and a set of processes and relationships involved in the production, distribution and disposal of the things we consume. In other words, the interest lies in where our goods come from and where they go when we are finished with them: in establishing geographical knowledges as to their origins and biographies (Cook and Crang, 1996).

The impulse to *reveal* connections implies that in the first place they are hidden or obscured. David Harvey (1990: 423) famously notes the muteness of the grapes on the supermarket shelves, upon which 'we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation'. We can eat a meal 'without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad social relationships embedded in the system that puts it upon our table' (p.422). Similarly, for Jhally (1990: 49-50) commodities 'draw a veil across their own origins', as information about 'what … things are composed of and what kinds of people made them' is 'systematically hidden'.

Harvey charges his readers with responsibility to 'lift the veil on this geographical and social ignorance' (1990: 423), through what Hartwick (2000: 1178) calls 'geographical detective work'. I return to the nature of this detective work in a moment, but first it is worth dwelling briefly on a key analytical concept that underlies it. In lamenting the 'ignorance' of consumers and the hiddenness of exploitation behind consumer goods, Harvey and others invoke Marx's notion

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[4] Or, indeed, achieving these reappropriations, subversions, negations and other-creations unwittingly or unintentionally.

of the *fetishism of commodities*. A fetish, in its anthropological sense, refers to a material thing imbued with spiritual or magical properties, typically describing religious practices involving worship of inanimate objects. In *Capital* Marx uses the term analogously to make sense of the 'mystical' or 'mysterious' character of commodities, which present 'the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' (1990 [1867]: 164-165). In other words, while the value of a commodity is in fact, for Marx, a function of the labour-time invested in its production, and of exploitative relations between employers and workers in that production, it appears to the consumer as an inherent property of the product itself.[5] The (exploitative) circumstances of production are concealed from view; 'the appearance of goods hides the story of those who made them and how they were made' (Lury, 2011: 38).

Commodity chain analyses: unveiling material reality?

Approaches to revealing these hidden stories vary in both their aims and their methods (for overviews see Leslie and Reimer, 1999; Hughes and Reimer, 2004; Mansvelt, 2005). A recurring feature is the (explicit or implicit) use of the *commodity chain* as a metaphor for imagining and modelling the connections between consumer goods and their biographies. This typically means beginning with a given item of consumption and 'tracing back' towards production, taking into account the various inputs along the way (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1977: 128; Fine, 2013: 220). Three schools of thought are typically cited as instrumental in the development of this type of analysis.

First, in world-systems research, where the term originates, a commodity chain is defined as 'a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity' (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986: 159). The focus of this perspective is on mapping the historical (re)production of systemic inequalities between 'core' and 'periphery' countries, critically exposing 'how commodity

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[5] Similarly 'the market' is frequently portrayed as a confluence of mysterious, external and impersonal forces – changes in demand, investor confidence, competitive pressures, globalisation – rather than as a product of historically specific social relations and arrangements (Fine and Saad-Filho, 2010).

chains structure and reproduce a stratified and hierarchical world-system' (Bair, 2005: 156). So, for example, analysis of the shipbuilding commodity chain (Özveren, 1994) is used to chart Dutch, and subsequently English, dominance of the world economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Second, the global commodity chain (GCC) approach – itself emerging from world-systems research – shares its predecessor's primary concern with uneven international development. However, while world-systems research seeks to understand long-term processes of change in the structure of the world economy, GCC analyses concentrate on the finer grain detail of particular commodity chains, especially on their governance and the differential distribution of power and surplus value along the chain (Gereffi, 1994). They pursue a less critical, more policy-friendly line of enquiry: how can governments and firms in 'peripheral' regions improve their position relative to competitors? And how can they 'upgrade' to 'higher value activities' within the chain (Gereffi et al, 2001: 5; Bair, 2005)?

Third, the systems of provision approach emerged in parallel to the GCC tradition 'with little or no dialogue between them' (Fine, 2013: 230), stemming from a rather different question: why do people consume in certain ways; or how is demand for particular goods generated? The argument begins with a critique of existing, 'horizontal' theories of consumption, each taking 'one or more explanatory factors, usually from within a particular academic discipline or motivated by the case of a particular consumption good, and generalis[ing] across consumption as a whole' (Fine, 1995: 142). Such factors might include rational utility maximisation, manipulation by advertising, social emulation or distinction, and so on (Fine and Leopold, 1993). In their place, a 'vertical' approach is proposed. In common with GCCs, this means focusing on a particular commodity or set of commodities and tracing back its specific system of provision, that is, 'the chain … that unites a particular pattern of production with a particular pattern of consumption' (p.4). One illustrative example is Fine et al's (1996; 1998) investigation into 'what we eat and why' (1998: 95). Here they attempt to explain changes in food norms with reference to specific food systems in the UK, including increasing meat consumption amongst lower income households. These trends are explored not solely in terms of individual-

level changes to consumer attitudes and behaviours – changing tastes, access to healthy eating information, ethical concerns, levels of disposable income – but also factoring in wider developments further up the chain, including the industrialisation of meat production and increased standardisation through supermarket retail.

These three influential chain-based approaches have helped establish a language and a way of theorising the connections between consumption and production. Each seeks to reveal stories hidden behind consumer goods and in doing so problematise surface-level, apparently self-evident assumptions about them. However, they speak to different concerns: the historical development of an unequal global economy; an uneven distribution of power and wealth across different points in a commodity's journey; and the factors involved in creation of demand for particular types of goods.

Getting behind the fetish

Despite their influence, none of the above approaches is primarily designed to connect *consumers* with the experiences of those producing their goods, the gap in knowledge identified by Harvey's (1990) call to 'get behind' the fetish. In response, Hartwick (1998; 2000; 2012) proposes a radical geographical reworking of these existing approaches to commodity chain analysis. Their shortcoming, she suggests, is that in focusing on chains as an integrated whole, for instance on their structures of governance, too little attention is paid to the specificity of points within those chains. Connections are prioritised over the situations and experiences that are connected; both the cultural meanings of consumption and the material conditions of production are neglected. Conversely, Hartwick's approach focuses on 'production, distribution and consumption *nodes*, and the connecting links between them' (1998: 425, my emphasis). These nodes are conceived as places: as sites of activity and relationships situated in space and time. This focus has an explicitly normative agenda, bringing consumers 'face to face with producers' and forcing them to 'confront the consequences of their comfort in the livelihood struggles of workers' (Hartwick, 2000: 1183). The intention is 'to expose the ways in which

retailing and consumption are implicitly shaped by, and dependent on, power relations and regimes of exploitation, illusion and exclusion' (Crewe, 2000: 281).

3.3 Commodity connections reconsidered

Other commodity geographers, while sharing the goal of better understanding connections between spaces of consumption and of production, are critical of Hartwick and of commodity chains approaches more generally. I now explore three important avenues of criticism and the alternative perspectives suggested along the way.

Acknowledging consumption

A first set of concerns relates to coverage: where chains begin and end; and which sites they emphasise or overlook. Certain spheres of activity are argued to be underrepresented, or missing altogether, in traditional accounts of commodity chains. Most notably consumption is treated unproblematically 'as a starting point from which to trace relations back to the underlying exploitative reality of production' (Leslie and Reimer, 1999: 404-5). Consumers are relegated to passive end users, while the points of interest, the hidden truths to be unveiled, the underlying realities, are assumed to sit further up the chain (Cook and Crang, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Lockie and Kitto, 2000). The consumer is 'fetishised as mere purchaser' (Miller, 1995: 53). The work done in putting things to use (de Certeau, 1984; Miller, 1987) and in disposing of them (Gregson et al., 2007b) is largely neglected, as are the continued journeys of goods after they enter the waste stream (Gregson et al., 2010; Lepawksy and Mather, 2011).

The earliest definitions of commodity chains hint at this bias towards production, treating the 'ultimate consumable item' as a *culmination* of inputs (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1977: 128) and the 'finished commodity' as the 'end result' of a 'network of labor and production processes' (1986: 159). For Hartwick (1998: 434) the act of purchase is 'the end point of a chain of [productive and reproductive] activities'. Moreover, she repeatedly distinguishes between the world of consumers as 'image space' and that of producers as 'real space' (p.430) in a manner which underestimates the former as much as it patronises

the latter. Consumption is 'cultural', while production is marked by 'social and natural conditions' (p.425). 'Images' of wealth and love are contrasted with 'stark realities of hunger' (p.432). And sites along the chain become 'increasingly real as one nears production' (p.434). While Hartwick's aim is ostensibly to engage with a politics of consumption, connecting consumers with producers, her research fails to take account of the lived experience of those consumers. Their significance is downplayed at every turn, ultimately reduced to their performance at the checkout: 'The possibility of agency lies in the potential ability to exert economic pressure with consumer dollars' (Hartwick, 2000: 1180).

Chains, circuits and networks

Second, the imagery of the chain – its structure and the simple causal pathways that it implies – is challenged as being too linear and too unidirectional to account for the complexity of commodity journeys. Alternative connective metaphors offered in its place include *circuits* and *networks*. Rather than assuming consumers to be passive recipients of the products of manufacture and marketing, or simply ignoring them altogether, 'circuits of culture' illustrate the active role of consumers in shaping not just abstract 'demand' for goods, but the way things are put to use and the meanings and knowledges attached to them. This is not a one-way process, in either direction; it is contested and iterative, relying on 'the interrelations of the full range of actors involved in the production, circulation and consumption of those meanings' (Cook and Crang, 1996: 141). Jackson and Taylor's (1996) study of advertising emphasises the work done by consumers, for example in decoding oblique, sometimes ironic intertextual references, and how this variously flatters, provokes or entertains the viewer. Also key is the potential for different readings and decodings between, but also within, particular localities or cultural contexts. This space for active participation is even argued to be 'relatively' empowering, providing 'opportunity for readings that reject or subvert the advertisers' intentions' (p.360). In summary:

> Advertising is a classic example of the nonlinear nature of media practices and of the applicability of more continuous, circular theories of production-consumption. … According to this model, producers

create a series of texts (within a given set of social conditions) that are read by different audiences according to their own social conditions and lived cultures. But the 'circuit' does not stop there, continuing through successive rounds of production and consumption as consumers 'second guess' advertisers' intentions and as advertisers try to anticipate consumers' reactions. (Jackson and Taylor, 1996: 365)

Another way of visualising connections without the 'uni-directional linearity' of the chain is provided by the commodity network. Here, linkages between the various actors and nodes in production and consumption are instead pictured as 'complex and multi-stranded … webs of interdependence' (Hughes, 2000: 178). Drawing heavily on actor-network theory, such approaches try to take account of the full range of participants that are implicated in shaping commodity flows. Crucially, networks comprise not only human beings but also nonhumans, that 'wealth of other agents' which might include material objects, technologies and the 'natural' world (Whatmore and Thorne, 2004: 239). Hughes, for instance, identifies a number of key roles in the cut flower trade that orthodox commodity chain approaches would 'fail to recognise' (2000: 188): not only are farm workers in the developing world connected to consumers in more affluent regions, but these 'vertical' chains are intersected with, to give just two examples, technological developments in horticulture, and the fast changing worlds of fashion and interior design.

A further key insight from actor-network theory highlights the provisional, partial and 'thoroughly relational' operation of power (Whatmore and Thorne, 2004: 237), questioning the ideal-typical buyer- and producer-driven chains prominent in GCC research (Gereffi, 1994; see Fine 2013 for further critique of these models). The reach of supposedly global institutions is, for Whatmore and Thorne, only ever contingent, 'depend[ing] upon intricate interweavings of *situated* people, artifacts, codes, and living things and the maintenance of particular tapestries of connection across the world' (2004: 236, original emphasis). Global networks are to be understood 'as performative orderings (always in the making), rather than as systemic entities (always already constituted)' (p.237). The power seemingly held in monopoly by global corporations is rather 'a social composite of the actions and competences of

many actants; an attribute not of a single person or organization but of the number of actants involved in its composition' (p.238).

Defetishising defetishisation

A third, broader critique calls into question the project of 'defetishising' commodities. On the one hand, the language of lifting the 'veil' of 'ignorance' (Harvey, 1990), although well-intentioned, leaves itself open to the charge of elitism. The implication is that 'academics have a uniquely critical insight into the social relations and conditions of production' (Jackson, 1999: 98), showing 'little respect for the political judgement or moral integrity of ordinary consumers' (Jackson, 2002: 8). Again, the consumer is portrayed as passive and apolitical. On the other hand, there is a naivety (Bridge and Smith, 2003) in assuming that such new-found knowledge – Hartwick's (2000) 'face to face' meeting of consumers and producers – would dramatically alter shopping patterns and impact positively on exploitative business practices (Jackson, 2002). Hartwick's model of consumer politics is one that accepts an orthodox economic view of both consumer rationality and sovereignty.

Furthermore, the task of defetishising – of revealing hidden realities – is less straightforward than it might appear. As already seen, such stories do not always follow linear paths. Ian Cook repeatedly reflects on his own struggle with a research project inspired by Harvey's (1990) rallying call, following tropical fruit from Jamaica to the UK: 'unravelling' the truth but 'becoming more entangled in the process' (Cook, 2004: 662). He discovered 'all kinds of (historical and contemporary) tangents and feedback loops in what might have appeared to be a linear study, and became more and more convinced that the fruit [he] was following was far from a discrete or passive object' (Cook, 2006: 661). And from a similar journey with West Indian hot sauce:

> …on closer inspection, this bottle – this thing – couldn't be followed, and direct connections couldn't be traced. … In, and through, that bottle of sauce, an amazing array of complex connectivities and mobilities, at work at starkly different scales, seemed to be being mobilized. (Cook and Harrison, 2007: 58)

Attempts at unpicking reality are complicated further by what Cook and Crang (1996) call the 'double' fetish. The first is the familiar interpretation of Marx's commodity fetishism: the 'construction of ignorance'; the cultivation of 'a vacuum of meaning and knowledge to be filled' (p.141). The second involves the filling of that vacuum, the re-attachment of particular, partial geographical knowledges to commodities in order to bestow distinction. Tropical fruits, for example, are placed 'within imaginary "exotic" worlds from which they supposedly originate' (Cook et al., 2004: 175). As Jhally (1990: 51) observes, this is central to how goods are marketed: 'Production empties. Advertising fills'.

But researchers and activists are implicated too: the stories they uncover and attach to commodities in the process of defetishising are themselves political, partial, 'noninnocent' (Castree, 2001: 1521). 'Ethical' credentials are used (selectively) to promote and sell particular products over others, in what might be called a 'fetish of defetishisation' (Binkley, 2008; Coles and Crang, 2011). Meanwhile high profile 'unethical' brands, once labelled as such, continue to be boycotted in favour of suppliers with similarly bad, or worse, employment or environmental records (Rosselson, 2009).

In response to this crisis of authenticity, Cook and Crang argue for engaging with commodities at face value, in context, rather than trying to look behind them. They use multi-site ethnography to bring detailed stories of production, distribution and consumption together, 'counterposing surfaces from different moments and places in a commodity's biography, not claiming any as more real, but disrupting their separation from each other' (1996: 147). Moral questions are posed '"between the lines" of a series of overlapping vignettes about people who were (un)knowingly connected to each other' (Cook, 2004: 642).

A refined model

A common thread in these three areas of critique is the tendency in analysis of commodity chains to oversimplify the highly complex biographies of things we buy. Of course this is true, to an extent, of any theoretical abstraction. In an attempt to improve the fit of the model, while maintaining core ethical concerns with the lived experiences of people (consumers *and* producers), a number of

conceptual and methodological alternatives have been proposed. These include, as detailed above, changing the way that connections between spaces of consumption and production are visualised (circuits, networks) and advocating more in-depth, embedded fieldwork at multiple sites on a commodity's journey.

One remaining question is what effect does all this added complexity have on the political potential of such research? Goss (2004: 372) is pessimistic, doubting that 'greater complexity … will help consumers themselves to understand the processes of consumption, much less to intervene in them'. Hartwick (2000: 1178) is stronger in her criticism, lamenting the decline of 'critical political edge' in geographies of consumption that fail to demystify commodities or offer 'strategies for action and formulas for change'. Leslie and Reimer (1999: 407) are more balanced, but worry that approaches which reject the causality of the commodity chain risk 'abandoning a language around which we can mobilise'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, advocates of the refined approach are more optimistic about their critical potential. Theirs is essentially a different model of engaging consumers politically, in turn based on a different understanding of what it means to be a consumer. Where Hartwick aims to provide information, arming consumers to make better shopping decisions, Cook and colleagues seek to bring about strategic 'ruptures' in commodity appearances (Cook et al., 2004: 174), spaces for consumers to actively, reflexively make sense of how their things connect them with far away others:

> …if we accept that geographical knowledges … are fragmentary, multiple, contradictory, inconsistent and, often, downright hypocritical, then the power of a text which deals with these knowledges comes not from smoothing them out, but through juxtaposing and montaging them … so that audiences can work their way through them and, along the way, inject and make their own critical knowledges out of them. (Cook and Crang, cited in Cook, 2004: 642)

In sum, thinking about commodity connections and how they might best be investigated and represented begins to hint at further conceptual questions. If the point is not merely to interpret exploitative relationships with human and

nonhuman others but to change them (Marx, 1998 [1888]; Castree et al., 2009), then how might ordinary, everyday practice be theorised as one site (among others) for helping bring about that change? The remainder of this chapter, and indeed the thesis, is concerned with precisely this question.

3.4 The logic of political consumerism

Hartwick's project of 'geographical detective work' is not only about 'obtaining information highlighting the connections between producers and consumers'. It is about using this information to 'inform our *daily* lives' (Hartwick, 2000: 1178, original emphasis), using 'knowledge of these geographical relations as the basis for a new kind of political activism' (p.1183). Her understanding of 'everyday practice as politics' is one of using the 'freedoms given [to] consumers by market societies' to demand positive change, selectively withholding their custom to hit profit-oriented companies where it hurts: 'The simple fact that demand is required before profit can be made, places enormous economic power in consumers' hands' (p.1184). As noted in the previous section, Hartwick's view of consumer agency – as lying in 'the potential ability to exert economic pressure with consumer dollars' (p.1180) – reflects the received view of consumer sovereignty, captured in Adam Smith's oft-cited maxim that consumption is the 'sole end and purpose' of production (Smith, 1976 [1776]: 179).

This way of conceptualising the political potential of everyday practice is central to the most prominent forms of what, in the UK, tends to be called ethical consumption (Clarke et al., 2007a). It is underpinned by a logic of political consumerism, that is, employing '*consumer choice of producers and products based on political or ethical considerations*' (Stolle et al., 2005: 246, original emphasis), with the intention of 'changing objectionable institutional or market practices' (Micheletti, 2003: 2). As such it represents the connection of 'the politics of consumption with the practices of being a discerning, choosey consumer' (Clarke et al., 2007a: 233).

Political consumerism entails using existing economic structures to achieve change-oriented aims. It is exemplified by the use of 'market-based political tools' (Micheletti, 2003: 15), including boycotts (withholding custom) or

'buycotts', where support for more desirable business practices is communicated by choosing particular, more 'ethical' products, most notably those carrying the Fairtrade mark or other forms of certification. Political consumerism, then, means attempting to 'intervene in the ordering of the matrix of global capitalism whilst firmly embedded in it' (Adams and Raisborough, 2008: 1166). As Varul (2009: 187) observes, this market-based understanding of ethical consumption is especially pronounced in the UK, where the emphasis is on remedying 'the failing free market … not by external means but by itself: through free and informed consumer choice'.

Problematising political consumerism

The effectiveness and desirability of this model of everyday political participation have been questioned on several fronts. While attempting to address specific problematic consequences of consumption, political consumerism neglects to question the exploitative social relations that inherently characterise capitalist commodity production (Fridell, 2007). In a model where the market 'decides who sinks or swims', it is argued, the experiences of distant producers are 'ultimately *entirely dependent* on the decisions of … atomised and individual consumers directly unaffected by the social outcomes of their market decisions' (p.100, original emphasis). Revealing the circumstances of production behind consumer goods does not necessarily prompt people to change their purchasing habits (Cluley and Dunne, 2012). Furthermore, as already seen in relation to the impulse to 'defetishise' commodities, this unveiling of reality is itself inevitably partial and potentially contested; selective representations of the origins and originators of things are used commercially to promote 'ethical' commodities and increase their market share (Goodman, 2004; Wright, 2004; Varul, 2008; Carrier, 2010).

A further set of criticisms relates to the apparently highly individualised nature of political consumerist modes of engagement, echoing broader accounts of the individualisation of society, as introduced in Chapter 2 (Bauman, 2001a; Beck, 1992). From the perspective of consumers, their perceived individual power to effect change through consumption choices is accompanied by the weight of individual responsibility and uncertainty as to the right way to exercise this

power (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). This can be 'a lonely task, conducted in *parallel, but not together*, with other consumers' (Autio et al., 2009: 49, original emphasis). For Maniates (2001), the '*individualization of responsibility*' unhelpfully draws attention away from 'institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society' (p.33, original emphasis). Social and environmental problems are framed as 'the consequence of destructive consumer choice', asking that 'individuals imagine themselves as consumers first and citizens second' (p.34; see also Bauman, 2007: 149).

Research into political consumerism has begun to address some of these concerns, at least in part. Although it is represented as an individualised, market model of political engagement – where the aggregate effect of multiple isolated decisions is assumed to impact on how businesses behave – this only tells 'half the story' (Clarke et al., 2007a: 241). Consumption can function as a point of entry, 'before enrolling ordinary people in more "active" forms of political engagement, like donating, joining as a member, or volunteering' (Barnett et al., 2005a: 51; see also Willis and Schor, 2012). Instances of ethically-framed consumption serve to support, and are supplemented by, various different forms of action. Micheletti and Stolle (2007) identify several spheres of activity other than direct market choice which together characterise broader political consumerist movements. Consumers might, for example, support traditional interest groups such as trade unions and NGOs, responding to calls for boycotts, backing public appeals and increasing the visibility of the cause. Alternatively, groups of consumers may act together as a 'spearhead force' of change, either speaking on behalf of fellow political consumers, or becoming role models in engaging those with similar concerns.

Other research points to the continued importance to political consumerism of campaigning, consisting of the 'intentional and coordinated collective action and framing activities' carried out by social movement organisations (Balsiger, 2010: 312). Campaigns influence which private consumption activities succeed in becoming political issues, competing to place and keep particular issues of concern in the public consciousness. Campaigns also work to establish credibility and legitimacy. This might mean mobilising numerical counts of

'ethical' consumers and volumes of sales, not as a direct appeal to business interests via the market, but as a discursive device to demonstrate scale and breadth of support (Barnett et al., 2005a).

Beyond rational choice

A small body of research into political consumerism has begun to shift attention from knowledge, and its impact on individual attitudes and behaviour, to the study of socially, culturally and materially constituted *practices*. Drawing on a set of related theoretical perspectives more commonly applied to critiques of governmental behaviour change interventions (e.g. Shove, 2010), practice-centred approaches have, in recent years, been applied to Fairtrade campaigning (Barnett et al., 2005a; 2005b; Clarke et al., 2007a; 2007b; Wheeler, 2012), the purchase of conflict-free and recycled jewellery (Moraes et al., 2015) and the marketing of green products (Fuentes, 2014). A common concern is with questioning attempts to shape the behaviour of supposedly rational, autonomous, individual consumers by providing better information. For example:

> …campaigns or policies that focus solely on providing information about the consequences of everyday consumerism, in the expectation that this will be enough to motivate changes in people's behaviour, underestimate the extent to which people find themselves 'locked into' certain patterns of consumption. (Barnett et al., 2005a: 46-47)

In changing emphasis from consumer agency to consumption practices as the primary object of enquiry, these studies have focused on a different set of research questions. This includes going beyond asking *why* 'curiously abstract' and 'detached' individuals (Clarke et al., 2007b: 585) are motivated to make certain consumption choices, to explore *how* they come to engage in particular ways of consuming, as embodied social actors. Research demonstrates the importance of existing social networks in both introducing people to new (ethical consumption) practices and sustaining their involvement over time (Clarke et al., 2007b; Wheeler, 2012). Furthermore, participants saw their engagement in these particular practices as stemming from, and as an extension of, their existing commitments in 'other civic, community, and political practices' as well

as other forms of consumption (Clarke et al., 2007b: 599). Other questions relate to the material and cultural prerequisites for new ways of consuming to take root in a given locality. This might include having sufficient financial resources, but also the presence of relevant technologies, infrastructures and amenities (from recycling bins to organic greengrocers) and the prevalence and salience of specific discourses, meanings and cultural conventions (Barnett et al., 2005a; Wheeler, 2012). Political consumerist forms of both campaigning and marketing, then, entail 'constructing material-symbolic artefacts that make sense to consumers and fit into their lives and their practices' (Fuentes, 2014: 106).

Although at this juncture I leave behind questions of political consumerism, the above research is helpful in highlighting a distinction between conceptual approaches that foreground individual behaviour and those that emphasise the social constitution of practices, with important implications for where academics, policy makers and activists focus their attention. This consideration is central to the theoretical underpinnings of my own research. As such, I return to it in greater detail in Chapter 4.

3.5 Rethinking everyday politics

The logic of political consumerism seeks to transform problematic aspects of the market from within. My own research, by contrast, looks at a set of practices characterised by their operating in parallel to, or in spite of, the formal economy. This activity can, on one level, also be understood in political consumerist terms: by exchanging things through alternative channels, support is withdrawn from what are considered to be unethical products and businesses. As will be seen in Chapter 7 (Section 7.3), this is partly consistent with how some research participants made sense of their action and its impacts. However, in this section I consider a series of alternative ways of conceptualising everyday life as a political space, which are of particular interest and relevance to my research.

A prefigurative tradition

Prefigurative practices are those intended to create, in the present, a small-scale version of a hoped-for future, by building 'alternatives in the here and now' (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 3). The term prefigurative politics, or prefiguration, has most commonly been applied to overt forms of political organisation, especially to the structures and decision making processes adopted by social movements. The emphasis is on ensuring consistency between the everyday details of activism and the goals of the movement, embodying '*within the ongoing political practice of a movement* … those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs, 1977: 100, my emphasis).

Historically, prefiguration has been associated with movements that are non-hierarchical, decentralised and emphasise participatory democracy through consensus decision-making (Graeber, 2002), from nineteenth century anarchism and early twentieth century workers' councils (Boggs, 1977), via the American New Left of the 1960s (Breines, 1980), to the alterglobalisation and Occupy movements in the 1990s and early twenty-first century (Graeber, 2002; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Juris, 2012).

Alongside overtly or traditionally 'political' action, prefigurative politics can also refer to more mundane aspects of social movement activity which seek to challenge the pervasiveness of, or experiment with alternatives to, the capitalist mode of production, 'breaking down the division … between everyday life and political activity' (Boggs, 1977: 104). For Boggs:

> …the radicalism of the sixties brought a new political content to the prefigurative tradition. It affirmed the importance of generalizing the struggles for self-management beyond the point of production, to include all spheres of social life and all structures of domination. It sought to integrate personal and "lifestyle" issues into politics … And it focused on a wider range of issues that confronted the social system as a whole: health care, culture, ecology, etc. (p.119)

A key feature that distinguishes prefigurative approaches from other logics of social change is the relative prioritisation of means and ends. Franks (2003) distinguishes anarchist prefiguration from other, consequentialist modes of

revolutionary activity where the desirability of a given action is determined by the extent to which it furthers the revolutionary goal; the end justifies the means. While prefiguration is usually contrasted with more formal political activity, such as taking state power (Boggs, 1977), a similar distinction can be made with the political consumerist mode of action defined in Section 3.4 above, in which the logic and infrastructure of the capitalist market is seen as adaptable to the interests of social and environmental justice campaigns. Again, it is considered a means to an end. In prefigurative politics, by contrast, not only are the means 'as important as the goal' (Breines, 1980: 422), but the two are inextricably linked: 'the temporal distinction between the struggle in the *present* and a goal in the *future*' is removed; 'instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present' (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 4, original emphasis).

A further important point about prefiguration is that it occurs *in practice*. It is about living experimentally, disrupting the received wisdom that There Is No Alternative by demonstrating, in practice, the viability of innovative ways of organising, working, exchanging and so on. It means not merely persuading or demanding, but 'actively setting up alternative structures so that people can *experience* for themselves' (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 16, original emphasis), demonstrating that another world is possible (Graeber, 2002; North, 2011; Portwood-Stacer, 2012).

Documenting these enclaves of overt experimentation is essential to a fuller understanding of the political potential of everyday acts of consumption (and everyday life more broadly), outwith narrow representations of political consumerism. There is, however, a further important dimension to uncovering this broader picture, extending investigation beyond the confines of consciously 'activist' action. What can be said about the ethical and political content of ordinary people's ordinary lives? What do people do as a matter of course that, in some way, knowingly or otherwise, resists commodification, asserts their dignity or exercises care for human and nonhuman others?

The productive work of consumption

For Michel de Certeau (1984) consumption is itself a form of production, or *poiesis*: it is creative, inventive and not, as 'commonly assumed', passive. As

such, the study of consumption should not end with the goods or images manufactured, the number of people acquiring them and the frequency with which they do so, but should also concern itself with how these things are put to use. For example:

> …the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer "makes" or "does" during this time and with these images. The same goes for the use of urban space, the products purchased in the supermarket, the stories and legends distributed by newspapers, and so on. (de Certeau, 1984: xii)

Consumption is a 'devious' and 'hidden' production, not manifest 'through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (pp.xii-xiii, original emphasis). Consumers are active in that they appropriate these existing products, reinterpret them and mould them to their own purposes as groups and individuals: they make 'innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules' (p.xiv).

In a similar vein, Daniel Miller has repeatedly observed how consumers appropriate seemingly standardised products, from the varied attempts of council housing tenants in London to modify and personalise their originally uniform homes (1988), to the adoption of American soap operas and soft drinks into Trinidadian cultural identity (1992; 1998a). More generally, Miller (1987) articulates a theory of the work done by consumers in taking hold of and transforming the things they buy or otherwise obtain. In contrast to the experience of shopping, immersed in a 'vast alienated world of products completely distanced from the world of production', the moment a chosen product is purchased 'the vast morass of possible goods is replaced by the specificity of the particular item':

> This is the start of a long and complex process, by which the consumer works upon the object purchased and recontextualizes it, until it is often no longer recognizable as having any relation to the world of the abstract … Thus, consumption as work may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable

condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations. (Miller, 1987: 190)

The object consumed, in other words, ceases to be an anonymous, fungible commodity. Over time, the work of consumption transforms the object from a commodity (that is, 'the product and symbol of abstract and oppressive structures') into its negation, something intimately associated 'with a particular individual or social group, or with the relationship between these'. Although the object's 'material form remains constant … its social nature is radically altered' (pp.191-192). Through this process of 'de-commoditization', 'social actors enter into a dialogue with the market, and even battle against it, to appropriate standardized commodities and to transform them into goods with personal meaning' (Sassatelli, 2007: 115).

Uniting these two accounts of the productive work of consumption is the political agency that is (however cautiously) attributed to consumers in general. Miller is wary of depictions of consumption as 'a heroic struggle or act of resistance' (2001: 233), but nevertheless frames it as a meaningful response to the dehumanising effects of capitalist production. Through consuming, ordinary people 'confront, on a day-to-day basis, their sense of alienation', attempting to 'create the identity they feel they have lost as labourers for capitalism' (p.234). Meanwhile, in de Certeau's analysis, to acknowledge the productive work of consumption is to recognise the inherent 'political dimension' of ordinary, everyday practices. It is through these 'tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong' (1984: xvii), that a marginalised 'silent majority' is able to subvert dominant culture from within, deflecting its power and 'escap[ing] it without leaving it' (p.xiii). That said, it is a strictly limited agency, opportunistic, defensive and unable to effect lasting change. It might entail countless 'victories of the "weak" over the "strong"', but no gains are made: 'whatever it wins, it does not keep' (p.xix). The overarching asymmetry of power is unaffected. While *strategies* are the preserve of the powerful (the producers of the various material and cultural products that consumers creatively put to use), *tactics* are employed by those without power, solely in the service of getting by or 'making do' with the resources available. In both

accounts, then, everyday practice works with the material given to it by the dominant order (e.g. the capitalist mode of production), adapts it to its own ends, making something meaningful – something *other* – with it, but does little to change the order itself.

Finding the radical in the ordinary

In contrast to de Certeau and Miller, John Holloway's (2002; 2010a) account of the political potential of everyday life is explicitly concerned with changing the world, that is, creating a different world. His (2010a) argument begins by imagining living under capitalism as being trapped in 'a room with four walls, a floor, a ceiling and no windows or door. … The walls are advancing inwards gradually, sometimes slower, sometimes faster, making us all more uncomfortable, advancing all the time, threatening to crush us all to death' (p.8). On closer inspection, though, the walls appear to be full of cracks, many of them barely visible. The hope of escape, in Holloway's view, is to locate, expand and multiply these cracks or interstices. Rather than waiting for the 'great revolution' and seizing state power, the potential for radical change lies in fostering 'a multiplicity of interstitial movements', enacted by 'ordinary people' (p.11):

> Social change is … the outcome of the barely visible transformation of the daily activities of millions of people. We must look beyond activism, then, to the millions and millions of refusals and other-doings, the millions and millions of cracks that constitute the material base of possible radical change. (Holloway, 2010a: 12)

Holloway is not prescriptive about what these daily activities might be, but gives numerous illustrative examples: organising and taking part in overt anti-capitalist gatherings, protests and celebrations; helping run a social centre or participating in and enjoying its activities; developing free software; creating a community garden with neighbours or spending evenings tending an allotment; singing in a choir for the love of music; taking time out from work to play with the children or sit in the park and read. Importantly, in the same breath as talking about the self-evidently political there are a host of more mundane practices imbued with the same prefigurative potential. The people and their actions differ but there are significant continuities and affinities between them. Crucially, what

unites them is, 'the refusal to let the logic of money shape their activity, the determination to take a space or moment into their own hands and shape their lives according to their own decisions' (p.21), however theorised or otherwise this 'refusal and other doing' or 'negation-and-creation' (p.24) might be.

In common with de Certeau and Miller, who in different ways observe the creative agency of consumers in appropriating anonymous commodities, at the heart of Holloway's narrative is a concern with countering the alienating effects of capitalism. A central idea in articulating the above moments or spaces of rupture is that they entail a type of activity wholly different from capitalist activity, subject to a different logic. Following Marx's analytical distinction between alienated labour and conscious life activity, later between abstract and concrete labour, Holloway distinguishes between 'labour' and 'doing'. The former is bound to the 'maximisation of profit', the latter rooted in 'the struggle for a world based on the mutual recognition of human dignity' (2010b: 910). Labour is 'unpleasant or subject to external compulsion or determination', while doing 'pushes towards self-determination' (2010a: 84). The drive towards self-determination, individual and collective, means affirming subjectivity, refusing to be reduced to a passive object; it is in Holloway's terms characterised by dignity: 'the assertion of our own dignity' closely accompanied by 'the recognition of the dignity of others' (p.39).

The potential of everyday practice to bring about a different world is rooted in a notion of *performativity*. Neither stability nor change is a given; both are the products of ongoing performance. The reproduction of capitalism, as well as the creation and expansion of alternative spaces, is accomplished through successive enactments of different types of activity. Reasons to be pessimistic and causes for optimism are cut from the same cloth:

> The insoluble dilemma of our cracks, the back-and-forth between hope and despair, is not composed of external forces but has to do with the organisation of our own practice. We create the society that we want to get rid of. That is terrible, but it is also the source of hope. If we create capitalism, then we can also stop creating it and do something else instead. (Holloway, 2010a: 86)

The possibility of changing the world, for Holloway, is to be found neither in attempts to reform capitalism by curbing its worst excesses, nor in trying to overthrow it wholesale. Instead the reader is implored to 'stop making capitalism', focusing attention not on destroying the imagined 'great monster' of 'pre-existing capitalism' (p.254), but on increasing the number, and reach, of moments and spaces that correspond to a different logic.

A politics of economic possibility

Third, the work of Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (writing together as J.K. Gibson-Graham) and their colleagues in the Community Economies Collective shares considerable common ground with Holloway. They, too, are concerned with documenting, learning from, and helping build, a diverse array of economic activities that are in various ways alternative to capitalist activities. However, they distance themselves from the view of alternatives as existing necessarily on the margins or in the interstices of capitalism, the corollary of a problematic understanding of capitalism as an all-powerful, coherent totality (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). In such 'capitalocentric' discourses, capitalism and noncapitalism appear in a hierarchical, binary relationship, in which 'the first term is constituted as positivity and fullness and the second term as negativity or lack' (p.6). Other forms of activity are understood 'primarily with reference to capitalism', as subsumed within it, as an inferior imitation, as its reproductive complement, its primitive predecessor or its eventual replacement.[6]

Gibson-Graham's approach to fostering change centres on a threefold 'politics of economic possibility' (2006b: xxxiii), consisting of a politics of language, of the subject and of collective action. A politics of language, more specifically the development of a non-capitalocentric discourse of economic difference, begins

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[6] It is not clear whether Holloway's account should be considered capitalocentric on these terms. He affirms the persistence and prevalence of capitalist social relations, the 'enormous cohesive force of capital' (2010a: 71), yet he dismisses the view of capitalism as a 'great monster' (p.254), and warns against characterising other doing as a confrontation with capital, which would be 'to allow it to set the agenda' (p.49). Indeed, as addressed in the introduction to the second edition of *The End of Capitalism*, Gibson-Graham's own focus on noncapitalist spaces could be considered capitalocentric (2006a: xxi-xxii). It is more productive to view the notion of capitalocentrism as a danger to be wary of and a tendency to continually grapple with, as part of an incomplete process of deconstruction, rather than as a way of denigrating particular thinkers or bodies of work.

in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*. Here, Gibson-Graham set out to challenge the belief, widely-held across the political spectrum, that 'capitalism is the hegemonic, or even the only, present form of economy and that it will continue to be so in the proximate future' (2006a: 2). Theorists, commentators and activists on the left have been guilty of perpetuating this belief, which in turn acts as a 'brake' on the 'anticapitalist imagination' (p.3). In response, the first goal of Gibson-Graham's politics of language is to discursively cut capitalism 'down to size' (p.xxiv) by questioning its assumed unity, singularity and totality. Like Holloway, they recognise the contingency of capitalism and its performative reproduction (or otherwise) in what people say and do: 'our economy is what we (discursively and practically) make it' (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: xxii). Rather than a 'structural and systemic unity' (2006a: 255), they raise the possibility of capitalism being more modestly 'a set of different practices scattered over the landscape' (p.260). A crucial second part of this politics of language, continued in their subsequent work, shifts emphasis from problematising representations of capitalism to documenting economic plurality, 'bringing into visibility a diversity of economic activities as objects of inquiry and activism' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 616; 2006b; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).

While a politics of language opens up multiple possibilities, previously closed off or marginalised, there is also a need for social actors ready to embrace those possibilities. A politics of the subject is about cultivating the inclination, dispositions and competences to see, think, feel, act, and be in the world differently. It is about the conflicted process of 'displac[ing] the familiar mode of being' and becoming 'not merely opponents of capitalism, but subjects who can desire and create "noncapitalism"' (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: xxxv-xxxvi). Finally, a politics of collective action means not only opening up possibilities and developing an orientation to act on them, but then getting together with other people to bring those possibilities to life. It means making 'conscious and combined efforts to build a new kind of economic reality' (p.xxxvi). Of course, the three modes of politics are interrelated. These collective acts, documented as demonstrative examples of economic diversity, can form both the practical outworking and the evidence base of the politics of language, while it is in the

doing of collective action that the new political subjectivity continues to develop and grow.

Ordinary prefigurative politics

Taken together these different ways of conceptualising the everyday as political can be represented as a spectrum, with de Certeau (1984) and Miller's (1987) respective notions of the productive work of daily consumption at one end, and overtly political prefiguration at the other. In between the two, and significantly overlapping with each, is what I call *ordinary prefigurative politics*. Drawing on Holloway (2002; 2010a) and Gibson-Graham (2006a; 2006b), this performative view of everyday life suggests that in our day-to-day doings and sayings we make and remake social relations, discourses and ways of acting. We reproduce existing patterns and create subtly different patterns. From this perspective social change is the product of ordinary people changing the way they think, talk and act. But how do they accomplish this? How do people come to engage in different ways of relating to and exchanging with others? This is a key empirical question for my study and it is one which requires further conceptual tools, as I explore in Chapter 4.

First, though, I turn to the relevant empirical work that has already been undertaken and, in the process, highlight a series of other important considerations for my work.

3.6 Documenting diverse economies

As introduced above, a key component of Gibson-Graham's (2006b) politics of economic possibility is to make visible the plurality of the economy, documenting both the prevalence and diversity of existing noncapitalist economic practices and deliberate attempts to foster alternatives. In this section I explore just a small subset of the academic research that can be considered part of this overarching 'performative ontological project' (2008: 618), focusing especially on insights relevant to my own study. I then give an overview of the literature on reclamation practices, specifically the three practices covered by my own research.

Before doing so it is useful to reflect on the type of investigation that this project implies. Rethinking the economy requires an openness, an 'orientation to seeing difference and possibility' (2008: 626), which for Gibson-Graham (2006b; 2008; 2014) is exemplified by an approach combining 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) with 'weak theory' (Sedgwick, 2003). Together this means suspending our expectations and taking note of the multiple complex relations underlying a given encounter, allowing us to resist 'confirming what we already know' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 619). For example, 'in an economy that is strongly theorized as becoming capitalist, the appearance of cash payments is evidence of the increasing hold of capitalist relations of production' (2014: S148), but in a weakly theorised diverse economy it could represent something else entirely. It is to these potential other readings that attention must be paid.

Such enquiry is not neutral and detached, but is necessarily political and change-oriented in its own right. In recognising the peformativity of knowledge, 'accepting that how we represent the world contributes to enacting that world', the traditional distinction between epistemology and ontology is eroded (Gibson-Graham, 2014: S149). Moreover, it involves making a choice as to 'what threads of interpretation to pull on' (p.S151). For Gibson-Graham this means reading (or re-reading) particular situations 'for difference rather than dominance' (2008: 623). As alluded to in the example above, the same set of circumstances can be interpreted in multiple ways. Reading for difference means recognising the 'always already diverse economic landscape', while 'open[ing] up the performance of dominance to research and questioning' (p.624). Although not always explicitly so, the overall orientation of the existing research discussed in the remainder of this section can be understood in these terms.

The prevalence of noncapitalist economic practices

One important task in documenting economic diversity is to consider the extent to which noncapitalist forms of exchange already exist, reading ordinary daily life for difference. Suspending the 'strong theory' of commodification (see Chapter 2), Williams (2002; 2005) highlights the persistence and magnitude of three non-commodified forms of work, 'even in the heartland of commodification

– the advanced economies' (2002: 526). First, non-exchanged or subsistence work is 'ubiquitous'. It can be defined as households providing 'goods and services for themselves on an unpaid basis' (2005: 37), including cooking, cleaning, car maintenance, home improvement, caring for children or elderly relatives, and so on. Drawing on a long history of time-budget studies and related analyses demonstrating the significant economic contribution of domestic labour (e.g. Gershuny, 2000; Ironmonger, 1996), subsistence work is shown to account for approximately half of all time spent working in the UK, estimated to be worth 'anywhere between 56 and 122 per cent of GDP' (Williams, 2005: 43). Furthermore, the proportion of working time spent on subsistence work has increased over time, contrary to the commodification thesis.

Similarly, Williams reviews existing evidence suggesting that non-monetised exchange – formal and informal volunteering outwith the household, including helping family and friends or wider community activities – is 'both significant in size and growing' (2005: 62), equivalent to between 10 and 12 per cent of GDP. Finally, Williams considers forms of monetised exchange conducted with no profit motive, that is, without the goal of economic gain. While acknowledging that the scale of public sector delivery of goods and services is shrinking, this cannot be explained entirely with reference to profit-oriented privatisation; the not-for-profit sector of the formal economy is 'a large and growing sphere of activity' (p.71). Moreover, significant proportions of monetised economic activity in the formal private sector, as well as informal cash-in-hand work, are conducted at least partly for reasons other than profit. Taken together, the accumulated evidence on these three broad categories of activity – subsistence work, non-monetised exchange and not-for-profit monetised exchange – makes a strong case that commodified work is 'just one of a plurality of economic practices used to produce goods and services in the advanced economies' (p. 81).

As well as quantifying the prevalence of noncapitalist economic practices, this evidence highlights a need to consider in detail the multiple motivations and logics characterising enactments of different forms of exchange – even monetary and ostensibly for-profit exchange – and not merely assuming the

centrality of maximising profit or utility. As Gibson-Graham observe in the example cited above, the presence of money does not necessarily imply 'the increasing hold of capitalist relations of production' (2014: S148).

In this vein, White and Williams (2010) identify a highly complex role played by money in mediating 'paid favours' or paid mutual aid between friends and family. In their research two key rationales underpinned the giving of money in return for favours: a redistributive logic, in which paying for help was understood as a legitimate way of financially supporting a (less well off) loved one; and a reciprocal logic, where payment helped maintain relationships by mitigating the discomfort of an unsettled debt (see also White, 2009). In either case there was little evidence of a pure profit motive; the use of money was deeply embedded in the social and the cultural. However, there are further nuances to this conclusion. There was evidence of a 'real wariness and reluctance' (White and Williams, 2010: 335) regarding the use of money as a gift in return for favours. The *perception* amongst participants of money as narrowly, asocially economic – arguably stemming from the performative effects of its continued portrayal as such – resulted in an anxiety that money given as redistributive or reciprocal gift might be misconstrued as payment for services rendered.

There is no reason to stop at problematising conventional understandings of informal, or even formal, not-for-profit monetary transactions. What room is there for logics other than profit maximisation within the for-profit sector? Capitalist enterprise is, after all, 'itself a site of difference that can be performatively enhanced or suppressed through research' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 624). Indeed, theorising capitalism as plural – having 'no essential or coherent identity' (2006a: 15) – is what enables a non-capitalocentric discourse of 'positive and differentiated' noncapitalism: 'If there is no singular figure, there can be no singular other' (p.14). In this spirit, North and Nurse (2014) explore the possibility of conceptualising normal SME owners as 'proactive environmental actors' (p.33). Their research demonstrates the range of different discourses employed by SME owners in making sense of their engagements with environmental sustainability. In addition to concerns for 'bottom line' issues of profitability, central themes in participants' accounts included morality, curiosity, commitment and enthusiasm. In the absence of guaranteed economic

advantages of pursuing more sustainable business models, other such motivations were not peripheral, but essential in maintaining their willingness to do so. Moreover, morally concerned, curious, committed and enthusiastic SME owners, while strongly disidentifying from their view of environmentalists, nonetheless acted amongst their business peers as advocates for sustainability, carefully reframing their arguments to address the priorities of particular known others.

Fostering alternative economies

A further body of research turns attention to the countless examples of experimental and/or established economic spaces constructed explicitly as alternatives, whether understood as complementary or in opposition to capitalism. Perhaps the most prominent area of empirical work of this kind relates to a variety of alternative or complementary currencies, including Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS) (North, 1998; 1999; 2005; Aldridge et al., 2001; Aldridge and Patterson, 2002; Seyfang, 2001a; 2001b; Williams et al., 2001; 2003), Time Banks (North, 2003; Seyfang, 2003; 2004), transition currencies (Longhurst, 2012; North and Longhurst, 2013; North, 2014a) and more. For a detailed overview of their many different organisational forms and approaches to issues such as valuation, managing circulation, etc., see North (2014b). A major focus of research into alternative/complementary currencies has been their potential impact on local economic development, especially in engaging those excluded from formal economic activity by providing opportunities to work and earn, to gain skills and experience, and potentially to improve their employability in more mainstream sectors (Seyfang, 2001a; Williams et al., 2001; 2003).

A broader set of questions, also raised by and explored in this body of research, are more directly applicable to my own study of alternative consumption practices. These include: why alternative currencies take off or don't take off in particular forms or in particular settings; who gets involved, who doesn't and the variation in levels of participation; how and why some initiatives survive over the long term but others disappear; how they relate to mainstream economic practices; and, indeed, the extent to which they can be seen as (part of) a

realistic provisioning mechanism outside of the mainstream economy. There is no space to consider each of these questions in detail here, but it is worth picking out some key themes.

First, the success of alternative currencies is dependent on there being enough demand for goods and services within the bounds of the scheme, and especially on a sufficient range of opportunities to spend the currency after earning it (Aldridge and Patterson, 2002). This has historically been a barrier to businesses' involvement in such initiatives, as they are likely to accumulate quantities of currency that they will find difficult to spend (North, 1998). While the intention here is to incentivise the cultivation of more localised supply chains, in reality many of the materials and goods required remain sourced from outside the immediate locality (North, 2010; 2014a). Second, this raises questions as to the most appropriate scale at which to operate. In many cases alternative currencies are premised on a strong commitment to localisation, whether for ecological reasons relating to reduced reliance on fossil fuels or to ensure that the benefits of local spending stay within the local economy (Seyfang, 2001b; Longhurst, 2012; North and Longhurst, 2013). However, evidence suggests that too local a focus can severely restrict the range of goods and services on offer, limiting the sustainability of the scheme (North, 2005).

Third, a source of debate in establishing alternative currency systems, and an ongoing issue in their use, has been how goods and services should be valued and how this should relate, if at all, to their valuation in conventional monetary terms (North, 1999; Aldridge et al., 2001; Seyfang, 2001a). In LETS, for example, pricing practices vary from place to place. Some schemes impose a standard hourly rate, others have upper and lower limits, while others still allow trading parties to freely negotiate and agree a price (Aldridge et al., 2001). In Time Banks all work is valued equally, in hours (Seyfang, 2004). More recent initiatives have used a currency linked to, and convertible to and from, national currencies. Often the exchange rate incentivises spending of the alternative currency by effectively acting as a discount redeemable only within the locality (North, 2014a). Finally, North (2010) reflects on the factors underpinning those currencies that have managed to survive for an extended period. These include:

having one or more committed activists who develop, and are in turn supported by, robust governance and administration systems; implementing 'commitment building mechanisms' that reward loyalty and penalise defection; and having a sufficiently large and dense network of participants who both benefit from involvement and have skills to offer.

Another route into researching the cultivation of alternative practices has been through the lens of autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). This research investigates spaces for living, communing and exchanging which are at once 'in, against and beyond' capitalist social relations, case studies in what Holloway (2010a: 24) terms 'refusal and other doing' or 'negation-and-creation'. Pickerill and Chatterton's research is born of 'a vocabulary of urgency, hope and inspiration … simultaneously a documentation of where we are, and a projection of where we could be' (2006: 731), of the many 'workable micro-examples' that already exist and the possibilities they point to and prefigure. Key empirical cases include autonomous social centres (Chatterton, 2010) and low impact housing (Pickerill and Maxey, 2009). Social centres are both activist hubs and settings for more public-facing, not-for-profit services, such as food cooperatives, affordable cafés, free shops and libraries, and offering a space for meetings, film screenings and gigs (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). Low impact developments (LIDs), meanwhile, turn attention to the residential aspects of everyday autonomous living. LIDs are radical housing projects designed with attention to ecological sensitivity and sustainability, as well as addressing housing needs and experimenting with different models of collective ownership and dwelling (Pickerill and Maxey, 2009).

Throughout is a concern with exploring the complex lived realities of enacting autonomous geographies, neglected in the existing research. There is a need, it is argued, for more 'detailed empirical accounts of the messy, gritty and real everyday rhythms' of building political and economic alternatives (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 481), for 'insights and case studies into what it actually means to be simultaneously against and beyond the capitalist present, while at the same time dealing with being very much in it' (p.475). Three broad themes emerging from these studies are worth drawing out for their direct applicability to my own research.

First, they highlight the 'complex and often contradictory process of activist-becoming-activist' (p.479). Participants' political identities were not pre-existing and fully formed, but were constituted in the day-to-day context of 'doing' activism; identities were thus multiple, 'messy' and subject to change; neat dichotomies of activist and non-activist were resisted, as were fixed sets of ideals or values. Second, they draw attention to the messy, sometimes conflictual realities of organising social life differently. For example, while social centres and LIDs were in many cases strongly committed to implementing direct democracy, in practice some began to incorporate more conventional structures of management and accountability to redress the, at times, 'cumbersome' nature of consensus decision making. And third, they articulate the relationships and dependencies between autonomous spaces and their wider contexts. Seeking to avoid the isolationist tendencies associated with some of their predecessors, many social centres were intentionally outward facing and participants were conscious of their legitimacy, appeal and contribution beyond activist communities (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton, 2010). Similarly, a concern amongst LID activists was to reach out and demonstrate the viability of their model to society at large (Pickerill and Maxey, 2009). More generally, aspects of participants' lives – perhaps inevitably – remained rooted in relationships, infrastructures and systems of provision at odds with their vision of the hoped-for world. Their daily negotiations might include rent, work/benefits, and access to goods and services, creating for many 'a sense of living between worlds: the one they are struggling against and the one they are trying to achieve' (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006: 737).

Spotlight on reclamation research

Finally, it is important to consider the existing evidence base on each of the three practices included in my empirical work: urban fruit harvesting, free online reuse exchange and skipping. In doing so I highlight key learning points for my own study and some of the gaps that my research seeks to address.

To the best of my knowledge there is no published academic research on urban fruit harvesting of the type included in my research: organising collectively to take fruit, specifically from people who cannot use it or do not want it, and

redistributing it to people who can and do.[7] The closest affinities are with research on wild foraging, guerrilla gardening and community food growing initiatives.

There is a limited, but steadily growing, body of dedicated research on free online reuse. The first published piece was a small-scale quantitative study of a local group in the US (Nelson et al., 2007). Participants' differing reasons for joining Freecycle were found to be, in order of prevalence: a desire for a 'simpler life'; 'self-oriented needs and wants' (getting free stuff, saving money); environmental considerations; and helping others. However, only primary motivations were taken into account. There was no consideration of multiple rationales – such as being simultaneously motivated by meeting one's own needs and by broader environmental or social concerns – or how these competing priorities were managed in practice. Arsel and Dobscha (2011) again focus on motivations, this time using a qualitative design and highlighting tensions between the goals of Freecycle as an organisation and those of its members. More recent research includes a large scale survey of members of Freegle groups across the UK (Martin and Upham, 2015).[8] Three clusters of members are identified, each characterised by their emphasis of different personal values. This suggests diversity between different groups of Freegle users in terms of their varying motivations and engagements with online reuse.

Other studies explore the implications of the gift economy model underlying online reuse exchange, characterised by what Sahlins (2004) terms generalised reciprocity. Group members 'freely give' without expecting anything directly in return. Instead, they understand this activity as sustaining the group as a whole, perpetuating the continued giving of gifts (Nelson and Rademacher, 2009: 906). Similarly, Willer et al. (2012) report positive associations (a) between users

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[7] I am aware of another PhD student, Kate Knowles from Cardiff University, whose doctoral research looks specifically at urban fruit harvesting projects. We were introduced when conducting our respective ethnographic fieldwork at the same cider making workshop and have subsequently maintained contact.

[8] Until recently there had been no published UK-based research on free online reuse. This has changed during the course of my study, with a series of recent articles emerging, including my own (Foden, 2012; 2015; Groomes and Seyfang, 2012; Harvey et al., 2014; Martin and Upham, 2015; Eden; 2015).

benefiting from Freecycle exchanges and identifying with the group, (b) between group identification and perceived group solidarity, and (c) between perceived solidarity and future giving activity. Guillard and Del Bucchia (2012) move analytical focus from group solidarity to the 'interpersonal encounter' between giver and recipient. Reuse networks and similar mechanisms 'liberate' givers from a number of obligations and anxieties associated with other forms of giving: removing any 'risk of refusal'; allowing the giver to meet the recipient and imagine the once-treasured object's future life; and facilitating 'an expression of spontaneous gratitude, which enhances the giver's self-esteem without engaging them in a bond of dependence' (pp.59-60).

Existing research, then, has most commonly explored individual motivations, attempting to explain participation and/or understand its meaning for participants. More recent work has begun to take research on online reuse in new directions. Harvey et al. (2014) look at Freecycle alongside other computer-mediated sharing economies, briefly considering how givers choose between potential recipients. Eden (2015) uses analysis of online messages, posted by members of two reuse groups in the UK, to problematise a series of binary oppositions: 'between digital and material, between consumption and disposal, between mainstream and alternative consumption, between gift and commodity and between wanted and unwanted goods' (p.17). In particular, she points to the productive work of reuse, in repurposing and revaluing goods that might be considered worthless – disposal practices 'are also practices that create "stuff"' (p.2) – but also to the continued influence, within online reuse, of how goods are promoted and valued in the monetary economy. These are important insights that resonate with my own research. There has, however, still been little consideration of *how* people come to engage in online reuse and how competing priorities are negotiated in practice. My work aims to address these gaps.

Skipping (or dumpster diving) is *comparatively* well-researched, albeit in a string of disparate, isolated studies rather than a coherent body of work. The majority of existing, published research has been undertaken in a North American context, with notable exceptions in Australia (Edwards and Mercer, 2007), New Zealand (Fernandez et al., 2011) and Germany (Rombach and Bitsch, 2015).

To my knowledge, there are no published academic studies of skipping originating from the UK, with the exception of an insightful analysis of its legality under English criminal law (Thomas, 2010).

Most of the existing research frames skipping/dumpster diving as part of a wider involvement and identification with a self-consciously political movement or subculture, especially 'freeganism' (Shantz, 2005; Edwards and Mercer, 2007; Coyne, 2009; Gross, 2009; Barnard, 2011; Corman, 2011; Pentina and Amos, 2011; Nguyen et al. 2014). Similarly, Clark (2004) looks at the culinary practices of 'punks' and Portwood-Stacer (2012) investigates the various 'anti-consumption' practices of 'self-identified anarchists' (p.88). Other research, by contrast, has focused on dumpster diving primarily as a means of obtaining nourishment, aside from any political connotations, especially amongst homeless people and others with extremely limited income (Eikenberry and Smith, 2005). My study differs from both of these. It shares the former's interest in the radical political potential of alternative consumption practices and the latter's concern with meeting ordinary day-to-day needs. However, whereas in the above examples participants were included in the research in their capacity as 'freegans', 'punks' or 'anarchists', or as 'low income' residents, my research participants were united first and foremost by their common engagement in the practice of skipping. There were other similarities, as well as differences, between them, but many played down any association with a movement or subculture.

Five themes emerging from the existing evidence on skipping are pertinent to my study. First, skipping is underpinned by a strikingly consistent code of etiquette. These 'unwritten rules' include: consideration for other bin users, especially those 'diving out of necessity' (Barnard, 2011: 429; Gross, 2009); only taking as much as one can use (Gross, 2009; Carolsfeld and Erikson, 2013); and leaving the bin and its surroundings in a clean and tidy state, in order to be as inconspicuous as possible and preserve the site for future use (Gross, 2009; Barnard, 2011; Crane, 2012; Carolsfeld and Erikson, 2013). Second, the lives of dumpster divers are marked by negotiating a complex relationship between the 'alternative' and the 'mainstream', recalling Pickerill and Chatterton's (2006: 737) 'sense of living between worlds'. Several authors

note the apparent contradiction that skipping depends on the wastefulness that it is constructed in opposition to (Shantz, 2005; Coyne, 2009; Gross, 2009; Fernandez et al., 2011). More broadly, while many research participants were striving to foster alternative economic and social spaces, living as far as possible 'outside' capitalism, in reality their lives were entwined with more conventional provisioning practices. For example, as Barnard (2011: 424) observes 'freegans must compromise their ideology with the practicalities of life' including, for many, working and paying rent (see also Gross, 2009).

Third, an empirical focus on skipping highlights the apparently transformative effects of placing food in the bin, in terms of how it is classified and valued. As more general research into food waste suggests, the process of discarding involves 'food' becoming 'non-food' (Evans, 2014: 65). It 'becomes waste through the moment of disposal rather than as a consequence of its innate material properties' (Watson and Meah, 2013: 110). Thus, conventionally, 'food in dumpsters is … garbage and repulsive: only untouchables, such as the homeless, eat trash' (Clark, 2004: 28). Intriguingly, though, for skippers this process seems to be reversed. 'Trash' is recategorised as 'food' (Corman, 2011: 42). More specifically, goods that were 'tainted' by their association with exploitative business practices become 'acceptable' when they are thrown away (Edwards and Mercer, 2007: 289). As Clark contends, 'in the process of passing through a dumpster, such foods are cleansed' (2004: 27), becoming 'decommodified' (p.21). While this holds for many goods, the consumption of salvaged animal products by otherwise vegetarian or vegan skippers remains controversial (Gross, 2009; Corman, 2011).

Fourth, existing studies have begun to reveal the multiple, complementary, and at times conflicting, motivations and purposes that underlie engagement in skipping. Carolsfeld and Erikson (2013) give a broad overview of these diverse explanatory narratives, summarised as serving 'biological, practical, ideological, and social' goals (p.256). Key examples include: getting by, saving money or being able to eat what would usually be unaffordable food; reducing waste; withdrawing support for 'unethical' or 'unsustainable' products; having fun and feeling good. Similarly Fernandez et al. (2011) identify economic motivations (e.g. having little money to spend on food), ideological motivations (e.g.

concerns with how goods are produced) and psychological motivations (e.g. enjoyment, unpredictability, thrill). They also, somewhat fleetingly, begin to consider relationships and interactions between these motivations, as well as how they change in relation to life circumstances. Their evidence suggests, for instance, that economic and psychological motivations change in relative importance as participants' financial situation improves or deteriorates. Also, interestingly, they find that ideological motivations – more politicised orientations – tend to develop over time, through experience, from what were initially primarily economic or psychological engagements. Portwood-Stacer (2012) begins to explore the experience of negotiating multiple – personal, moral, activist, identificatory and social – priorities, whereby fulfilling one goal often 'works *against* another' (p.102, original emphasis). In her study, participants displayed awareness of these tensions. Indeed, being conscious of contradictions was seen as productive, allowing participants to remain critically engaged with the practices they sometimes carry out.

Fifth, previous research begins to question, although as yet not in any great depth, not only why but how people come to engage in alternative ways of consuming. As Edwards and Mercer (2007: 283) observe, 'people often became aware of [dumpster diving] through friends', suggesting the importance of social networks in introducing people to new practices. Conversely, Fernandez et al. (2011: 1785), again briefly, note participants' own efforts at 'converting friends and family into divers ... by sharing finds, and stories of finds, deliberately focusing on the positives rather than the negatives of their experiences'. Further research could usefully unpack how these processes occur, as I aim to do in the present study.

3.7 Conclusions

I set out in this chapter to consider the notion that consumption is political, in terms of both the (undesirable) social relations that are reproduced in the circulation of goods and the potential to intervene in these relations by consuming differently. I began by considering the connectedness of consumers with distant others before reviewing different ways of conceiving of everyday life as a space of political participation, eventually arriving at a notion of ordinary

prefigurative politics: enacting social change in the seemingly inconsequential details of daily life. Finally, recognising a discursive dimension to this politics, in which academic enquiry can play a part in shutting down or opening up economic possibility (Gibson-Graham, 2008), I gave an overview of existing empirical work looking to document diverse economies. In the process, I have begun to allude to some areas to which my own research can contribute. I now draw this chapter to a close by making these intended areas of contribution more explicit, with reference to (1) understandings of three reclamation practices, (2) the relationship between alternative and mainstream economic practices, and (3) the everyday as political.

One primary function of the three reclamation practices included in the research – free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping – is to form the empirical context in which to address a series of conceptual questions. However, furthering the evidence base on these particular practices represents a contribution in its own right. There has, to date, been only limited research on any of the three phenomena. My study pays extended attention to how each of these practices is materially and symbolically constituted, how they differ from and relate to other practices, and how they have moved from place to place. It adds to the little existing evidence on how people come to engage in these practices and on their multiple motivations for doing so, two key concerns in my research.

I situate my study as one modest enactment of that 'performative ontological project' of making visible the plurality of the economy (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 618). On these pages, the ubiquity and hegemony of capitalism is under question. More specifically, I aim to continue the task of deconstructing unhelpful hierarchical binaries by further problematising the distinction between alternative and mainstream economies (White and Williams, 2016). As Jonas (2010: 5) argues, this includes 'investigating and revealing the tensions and contradictions underpinning the emergence, growth, contraction, cooptation and/or proliferation of alternative economic and political spaces'. As seen above, interactions between alternatives and the mainstream have been a central theme in existing research on alternative currencies (North, 1999) and autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Pickerill and Maxey,

2009; Chatterton, 2010). This theme has been more tentatively explored in relation to online reuse (Eden, 2015) and skipping (Gross, 2009; Barnard, 2011); it is my intention to do so in greater empirical depth. Problematising the alternative/mainstream dualism might also involve 'reading for difference' those monetary exchanges that might be assumed to be underpinned by a narrowly economic drive to maximise utility. As White and Williams (2010) and North and Nurse (2014) have exemplified, a focus on the multiple logics and motivations at play can challenge this assumption, highlighting the prevalence of 'alternative' discourses in supposedly 'mainstream' spaces. Again, I take this forward in my own research by considering participants' negotiation of different motivations and their navigation between reclaiming and other ways of acquiring and disposing of things.

As this chapter has made clear, a central concern in my research is to contribute to understandings of everyday life as a political space. At the simplest level I explore this on my research participants' own terms by investigating their understandings of the change-making potential, or otherwise, of their daily lives. Furthermore, in the context of what I term ordinary prefigurative politics, a key empirical question in seeking to better understand the politics of the everyday is how people come to act in different ways, individually and collectively. Previous *practice*-oriented research on political consumerism (see Section 3.4) has begun to engage with this question. This work points especially to the role of social networks, and existing participation in related practices, in introducing people to new ways of consuming (Clarke et al., 2007b; Wheeler, 2012). Meanwhile, research into autonomous geographies has shed light on the process of 'activist-becoming-activist' – or what Gibson-Graham (2006b) call a politics of the subject – whereby political identities are not pre-existing but are constituted in the everyday 'doing' of activism (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). Existing empirical work on online reuse has yet to explore these issues, while research on skipping has noted the importance of social networks (Edwards and Mercer, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2011), but not investigated the question in any great depth. In my research I take this further.

I return to, and further develop, these areas of contribution at the end of Chapter 4, after first articulating a practice-oriented theoretical framework for

the study. This way of understanding what people routinely do and how that changes is well suited, I argue, to a performative and prefigurative conception of the everyday as political, especially in seeking to uncover how people become engaged in new ways of doing things and how that engagement plays out on a day-to-day basis.

Chapter four: theorising everyday life and social change

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3 I introduced a central concern of the thesis: to better understand the relationship between ordinary, day-to-day activities – like what we buy and don't buy, or how we dispose of things – and a series of hoped-for changes at various larger scales, from fostering more mutually supportive social and economic spaces at a local level to reconfiguring exploitative relations with (spatially and/or socially) distant human and nonhuman others. More specifically I considered how everyday life is framed as a site for intervening in these prevailing and problematic arrangements.

Particularly compelling is a *prefigurative* and *performative* understanding of the everyday as political. The unjust, unsustainable or otherwise undesirable ways of relating to one another that are implicated in social and environmental problems are not taken for granted as ubiquitous and inevitable. Rather these relations are successively reproduced in practice and are hence subject to change, *by people acting differently*. By the same token, each instance of what Holloway (2010a) calls 'other doing' can be seen as partially and provisionally accomplishing a different (more desirable) set of relations. The challenge, on a daily basis, is to 'stop making capitalism and do something else instead' (p.236).

Of course, this raises further questions. How do people change the way they act? How do individual-level changes impact on collective patterns of activity, and vice versa?

These are important empirical lines of enquiry, but they can be (and have been) addressed in different ways, according to different theoretical assumptions. In this chapter I consider the merits of a particular set of approaches to asking these questions that emphasise the social organisation of practices and the engagement of embodied social actors with those practices. In doing so I set out a theoretical framework for my own empirical research.

In Section 4.2 I give an overview of these practice-oriented approaches, how they have been applied (especially in relation to governmental behaviour

change interventions) and how they might usefully shed light on alternative consumption practices framed as a site of ordinary prefigurative politics. I highlight the value of a twin focus on the lives of practices and of their practitioners before, in the following sections, unpacking in further detail some of the conceptual tools that practice approaches offer for investigating each of these respective concerns. First, in Section 4.3 I focus on the constituent elements of practices and how they can aid understanding of how patterns of social activity emerge and evolve. I then shift attention to practitioners, how they become recruited to practices (Section 4.4) and how they select between different potential courses of action on a day-to-day basis (Section 4.5). I end the chapter by returning to the intended contributions of the thesis, as begun in Chapter 3, adding some further detail.

4.2 Theories of practice

Attempts to understand how people come to act in certain ways, and how that changes or stays the same, inevitably touch on two classical problems of social science. A first debate concerns the relationship of social phenomena to the sum of their parts. Are social institutions and social change ultimately explainable as the 'result of the action and interaction of individuals' (Elster 1989: 13), as methodological individualism supposes? Or are social phenomena irreducible to their individual parts, with explanation for individual actions to be found in social patterns? Second, to what extent is behaviour freely chosen by individual agents and to what extent is it constrained or determined by social structures?

Theories of practice are best understood as a loose collection of approaches connected by a common concern and a shared orientation: to (1) overcome the individual/totality and agency/structure oppositions (amongst others), by (2) shifting focus from individuals, free or constrained, to the organisation of practices and moments of engagement with those practices (Schatzki, 1996; 2001). A practice-oriented approach, then, is one sympathetic to Giddens' ubiquitously cited principle that 'the basic domain of study of the social sciences … is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time' (1984:

2). Practices are, it is argued, the 'fundamental social phenomenon' (Schatzki, 1996: 11): both 'social order and individuality … result from practices' (p.13).

Recent examples of practice-oriented research have drawn heavily on theoretical work by Schatzki (1996; 2002), Reckwitz (2002), Warde (2005a), Shove and colleagues (Shove et al., 2012), which in turn builds, critically, on earlier formulations by Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1990). Of central importance to later work is the recursive relationship between two senses of 'practice': *performances* 'enacted in specific moments and places', and their enduring but always contingent patterns, or practices-as-*entities* (Shove, 2010: 1279). Understood in this way, practices are sites of both reproduction and innovation (Warde, 2005a). Each individual performance is 'governed' by 'a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives' often followed 'without much reflection or conscious awareness' (p.140). At the same time, 'practices also contain the seeds of constant change' (p.141), since they only exist in their repeated enactment, itself subject to significant variation. Normality is never more than provisional; it requires 'constant reproduction' (Shove, 2010: 1279).

Applying theories of practice: decentring individual rationality in behaviour change policy

Contemporary applications of theories of practice have, in many cases, been framed as part of a dialogue with policy actors, sometimes quite literally (Shove, 2014). Practice approaches are presented as a corrective to mistaken assumptions underlying government-led behaviour change interventions, especially those seeking to foster more environmentally sustainable lifestyles (Shove, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011). In particular, they can be positioned in contradistinction to three related individualist narratives, which together are highly influential on public policy, but often only implicitly so.

First, rational choice theory assumes human action to be inherently rational, calculative, instrumental and self-interested. Put simply:

> When faced with several courses of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome … Actions are

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valued and chosen not for themselves, but as more or less efficient means to a further end. (Elster, 1989: 22)

The conscious maximiser of utility is the central character of neoclassical economics, a school of thought which in turn dominates mainstream economic analysis. And numerous approaches in the wider social sciences have adopted this way of conceptualising individual decision making, to varying degrees and from 'strong' to more 'bounded' understandings of rationality (Becker, 1976; Simon, 1992; Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1998).

Second, the field of behavioural economics applies psychological insights to economic perspectives on decision making. Whereas rational choice theory takes preferences to be given, as exogenous to the model, behavioural approaches are concerned with how preferences are formed, drawing on experimental data about how people act when faced with particular dilemmas. For instance, evidence suggests that consumers are 'loss averse'; they 'dislike losing commodities from their consumption bundle much more than they like gaining other commodities' (Camerer and Loewenstein, 2004: 15).

Third, in social psychology the language of preferences is exchanged for 'attitudes' and their relationship to behaviour, or what Shove (2010) calls the 'ABC' model.[9] The logic, however, remains close to that underlying rational choice approaches: individuals choose certain behaviours based on some internal assessment of what they think is best; humans are 'rational animals who systematically utilize or process the information available to them', their beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviour sequentially linked by a 'causal chain' (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975: vi). The social-psychological literature on attitudes and behaviour is vast and there is little to be gained from regurgitating summaries of the many tens of theoretical models in circulation (see Jackson 2005; Darnton, 2008). In essence, such theories are increasingly complex iterative expansions of the underlying logic above, adding further explanatory variables (habits, norms, external contextual factors) to account for observed

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[9] Shove gives a critical overview of this broad paradigm, whereby 'social change is thought to depend upon values and attitudes (the A), which are believed to drive the kinds of behaviour (the B) that individuals choose (the C) to adopt' (2010: 1274).

disconnects between attitudes and action (e.g. Fishbein, 1963; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991).

These three perspectives – rational choice theory, behavioural economics and the social-psychological 'ABC' model – are united by a focus on individual agents, whose behaviour is causally determined by internal preferences or attitudes, and who encounter an external world of barriers and forces, constraining their choices to a greater or lesser extent. In relation to pro-environmental behaviour change programmes, their prescriptions for intervention tend to be aimed at individual decision making, assuming that social change will occur only as an aggregate property of many individual changes.

Shove's (2010; 2014) goal is not so much to discredit the work of economists and psychologists, as to advocate a different, perhaps more productive approach first to problem definition and then to intervention. She argues for a shift in emphasis from individual agents, their orientations to behave in certain ways and the constraints they face, to the emergence, development and disappearance of social practices. In terms of intervention, this means focusing less on providing information, influencing attitudes and imploring individuals to change bad habits, and more on reconfiguring both the constituent *elements* of practices and the *relationships between* different practices (I return to these properties of practices in a moment).

Towards a practice-oriented understanding of everyday prefigurative politics

Aside from formal governmental policy applications, theories of practice have also been applied to social movement-type interventions in everyday life (Wahlen and Laamanen, 2015). Their application to political consumerist modes of action, for example, is in many ways analogous to their use in critiquing behaviour change policy. As highlighted in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4), a shortcoming of conventional understandings of political consumerism – of turning the logic of the market to political ends – is their tendency to focus attention on the behaviour of individual consumers, understood as rational (albeit civic-minded) utility maximisers, as the locus of change (Clarke et al., 2007b). The typical assumption is that, by providing individuals with more

complete or more accurate information, or by persuading them with reasoned appeal to their attitudes and values, they will choose and then carry out different courses of action. In response, a small body of research has shifted emphasis, again, from trying to explain the behaviour of rational individuals to exploring the changing (and unchanging) dynamics of social practices (Barnett et al., 2005a; 2005b; Clarke et al., 2007a; 2007b; Wheeler, 2012; Fuentes, 2014; Moraes et al., 2015). In contrast to the predominant view, this work suggests that becoming an ethical consumer does not result solely or primarily from 'learning about the extended consequences of [one's] actions' or 'being provided with information about alternatives'. Instead it depends on interpersonal networks and on the reconfiguration of technologies, infrastructures and discursive 'frames of reference' (Barnett et al., 2005a: 47).

In my own work I take a lead from the above debates and employ – in the context of alternative consumption practices – a practice-oriented approach to understanding what people do and how that changes. In contrast to the applications already discussed, however, I suggest that a prefigurative conception of the everyday as political (as detailed in Chapter 3 and summarised above in Section 4.1) is *already receptive to a social practice orientation*. It is eminently compatible with transcending binary oppositions, including agency/structure and individual/totality, in the manner offered by theories of practice: on the one hand it posits repeated performance as the site of both social change and reproduction; on the other hand it grapples with the persistence of existing patterns and arrangements, while refusing to promote these to a totalising social system.[10] Theories of practice provide a sociological means of conceptualising 'how people change the way they act', without doing violence to the many insights already underpinning prefigurative understandings of everyday political action. Despite their complementarity, there have been few analyses of everyday prefigurative action explicitly through a practice-theoretical lens. Notable exceptions include recent work on local food cooperatives and

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[10] For Gibson-Graham (2006b: xxxiii) 'a politics of possibility … does not preclude recognizing sedimentations of practice that have an aura of durability and the look of "structures", or routinized rhythms that have an appearance of reliability and the feel of "reproductive dynamics"'. It is not 'to deny the power or even the prevalence of capitalism but to question the presumption of both' (2006a: 262).

solidarity purchasing groups (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Fonte, 2013), veganism (Twine, 2014), autonomous social centres (Yates, 2015) and eco-communities (Pickerill, 2015).

In common with other practice-based studies I am interested in the biographies or 'careers' (Shove et al., 2012) of both practices and their practitioners: how different (social) patterns of activity emerge and evolve; and how these become an integrated part of (individual) people's lives. That said, my research strikes a different balance between these two concerns to Shove's policy-focused application, one more appropriate to my own empirical context. In her 'strong' practice approach, keen to redress an overemphasis of individual responsibility in recent public policy, she suggests that policy makers focus attention on, and intervene directly in, the constitution of practices (Shove, 2014). This might, for instance, involve effecting infrastructural changes or implementing procedures and guidelines, paying careful attention to how these, and other, elements interact to make practices what they are. It means using the reach of state power to intervene at a 'macro' scale (for want of a better term) by effectively restricting the permutations of possible performances.

By contrast, in fostering alternative practices, practitioners innovate with novel arrangements of constitutive elements, but have relatively little reach to ensure that others, en masse, do the same. To appropriate (and slightly misuse) de Certeau's (1984) terminology, their operations are more tactical in character than strategic. Instead, they might (wittingly or unwittingly) concentrate on increasing the number of performances of the alternative formulation, by seeking to enrol more practitioners. In my research, then, I aim to explore the trajectories of both practices and the people who carry and perform them, but more weight is given to the latter: to how people come to be engaged in new practices, how this engagement is sustained and how it plays out on a day-to-day basis. This balance is also likely to be better suited to investigating a form of politics in which 'revolutionary self-cultivation' is simultaneously a means and an end, helping shed further light on the notion of a politics of the subject (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: xxxv).

With this in mind I now return to how recent theories of practice have conceptualised practices-as-entities, how they are constituted and how they relate to each other. I then move on to consider ways of theorising how practitioners are recruited (Section 4.4) and how they navigate between different available practices in everyday life (Section 4.5).

4.3 The elements of practice

As introduced in the previous section, a key feature common to recent practice approaches is the distinction made between practices-as-entities and practice-as-performance, and the recursive, co-constitutive relationship between them.[11] The former refers to practice as 'a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 1996: 89), that is, 'a routinized type of behaviour' (Reckwitz, 2002: 249), a pattern which 'endures between and across specific moments of enactment' (Shove et al., 2012: 7). Meanwhile practice-as-performance describes precisely these specific, temporally- and spatially-situated enactments, the 'do-ing' which 'actualizes and sustains' or reproduces the enduring patterns (practices-as-entities), and without which those patterns would not exist (Schatzki, 1996: 90).

What makes isolated doings and sayings – or individual performances – 'hang together' as an intelligible practice, recognisable as such and distinguishable from other practices, are their shared organisational components or *elements* (Schatzki, 1996; 2002; Shove et al., 2012). Following Shove and colleagues I distinguish between three broad categories of element to structure my analysis of reclamation practices: materials, meanings and competences. Materials are 'objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself' (2012: 23). Meanings refer to 'symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations', while competences include 'skill, know-how and technique' (p.14), often formalised in procedures (Warde, 2005a) or rules (Schatzki, 1996; 2002). Crucially, these

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[11] As shorthand, where I refer to practice as a countable noun – i.e. 'a practice' (singular) or 'practices' (plural) – I mean practices-as-entities, mirroring Reckwitz's (2002: 249) use of the German *Praktik(en)*. I use the terms performance(s) and enactment(s) interchangeably to denote practice-as-performance.

elements are conceptualised as properties of practices (often simultaneously properties of many practices) and not as attributes of individual actors.

A given practice-entity, then, is recognisable by its particular set of materials, meanings and competences. However, the interconnection of those elements – that is, the existence of the practice – is formed and sustained only 'in and through integrative moments of practice-as-performance' (Shove et al., 2012: 22). Stability is only ever provisional, accomplished in successive performances. In summary, displaying the elements of a given practice is what makes its individual performances hang together, while repeated performances allow those elements to continue to hang together.

Defining and delimiting practices

The first task of my analysis (Chapter 6) will be to 'map' the respective boundaries of free online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping as practice-entities. My intention is to define and delimit each practice (Schatzki, 2002), isolating the particular elements (materials, competences and meanings) that make performances of that practice identifiable and distinguishable from performances of other practices.

'Mapping' practices in this way, and the elements which compose them, is helpful in understanding social reproduction and change – essentially how practices emerge, survive, evolve and die out – in a number of ways. First, the materials-competences-meanings schema makes sure that due consideration is given to the quite different defining properties of what people routinely do. For example, it ensures that attention is paid to how practices are both materially and symbolically constituted and that the priority of one over the other is not assumed. Second, it gives a frame of reference for observing changes in practices over time. It draws attention to interdependencies between different elements, enabling analysis of what happens when, say, one particular element changes: how does this impact on the other elements and on the practice(s) they together constitute?

Determining the boundaries of a given practice is somewhat arbitrary and always provisional. A practice can be 'whatever actual and potential

practitioners recognize as such' (Shove et al., 2012). There are no special criteria for deciding the extent to which enactments need to 'hang together' to be considered a practice: it is merely a function of what makes sense to consider a recognisable practice in a particular time and space, and what is analytically useful. Of course, this means any observable phenomenon could be mapped in different ways. It could be argued, for example, that skipping for political reasons and skipping out of hunger are two different practices, or alternatively two ways of performing the same practice. Equally, depending on interpretation of the law (Thomas, 2010), skipping could be considered, alongside shoplifting, as different ways of doing supermarket theft. Acknowledging the contingency of classification draws attention to two more uses of the approach.

Third, then, it provides a benchmark for analysing variations in performance within a given practice, and the impact of those variations on the continued existence and evolution of the practice. As Warde (2005a; 2013) argues, the specific ways that elements are integrated in the enactment of a given practice can vary considerably from person to person and especially from place to place. While 'ideal' ways of performing can be codified, for instance as rules, guidelines or instructions, actual performances do not necessarily adhere to these codifications. As already noted, variations in performance, if sustained and spread, are the roots of social change (Hitchings, 2013).

Fourth, as well as identifying boundaries between practices, mapping can highlight how they 'overlap'. Practices connect with each other in at least four ways. Different practices might be spatially co-located, like the multiple activities taking place in a typical home or office (Shove et al., 2012). They meet via the people that perform and carry them; as Reckwitz puts it, 'the individual is the unique crossing point of practices' (2002: 256). Two distinct practices might share one or more elements. Or a given performance might simultaneously enact more than one practice (Schatzki, 2002). The degree of connectedness also varies. *Bundles* of practices are 'loose-knit patterns based on … co-location and co-existence', while *complexes* are 'stickier and more integrated', some becoming 'so closely connected that distinctions between them dissolve' (Shove et al., 2012: 81-82). In the same way as the practices themselves,

relationships between practices are reproduced and potentially reconfigured in repeated performances. Crucially, these various comings-together of practices are another important way of thinking about change. When practices come into contact they 'condition each other', resulting in 'mutual adaptation, … destruction, synergy or radical transformation' (p.86).

A fifth area of interest, again aided by mapping the constituent elements of a given practice, is in understanding migration: how practices established in particular places go on to emerge and take root in new locations. Shove et al. (2012: 39) argue that practices themselves are 'necessarily localized, necessarily situated instances of integration'. They do not travel, intact, from place to place. However, their individual elements do. Materials can be physically transported, whereas competences and meanings are in different ways abstracted into codified form and then 'decoded' at their destination. These elements' successful reintegration as practices elsewhere depends on the co-existence of other requisite materials, competences and meanings, including the skills required in decoding. Often, though, they join with different elements in the new location, reinventing the original practice in a new form (Shove and Pantzar, 2005).

I begin my analysis (in Chapter 6) by exploring each of these above areas in turn: ascertaining the material and symbolic constituents of reclamation practices, investigating the intended and unintended consequences of a particular innovation (the absence of money in online reuse exchange), looking at variations within practices and relations between practices, before finally considering their establishment in new locations.

Having initially focused on the lives of the three reclamation practices in this way, I then (in Chapters 7, 8 and 9) shift analytical attention to the experiences of their practitioners. In order to do so I first need to identify some further conceptual tools, the task at hand in Sections 4.4 and 4.5.

4.4 Recruitment to practices

In Chapter 9 I ask how my research participants came to be engaged in alternative consumption practices – how they were recruited – and how this

engagement has been sustained. An important conceptual question for the present chapter is how practice-oriented theory and research has, to date, made sense of this process. Discussion here can be separated in two: first, ways of thinking about the respective likelihood of differently situated actors to come into contact with, and engage in, a given practice; and second, the experiences through which this contact and engagement is facilitated. I now consider each of these questions in turn.

Structured opportunities to participate

A first point to make is that not everyone is equally likely to come to engage in a given practice. On the one hand, people have different aspirations, inclinations and tastes. On the other hand, they have differing access to the resources required for participation: the constitution of practices 'generates highly uneven landscapes of opportunity, and vastly unequal patterns of access' (Shove et al., 2012: 135). Both sets of factors are the outcome of past experiences and are 'structured by divisions like those of age, gender and social class' (Shove, 2014: 425). Such concerns have been marginal within recent formulations of theories of practice (Shove and Spurling, 2013; Walker, 2013). However, they were central preoccupations of practice theorists past, especially Bourdieu.

The three 'central organizing concept[s]' of Bourdieu's theory of practice are field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 94). Put simply:

> …social practices are generated through the interaction of agents, who are both differently disposed [habitus] and unequally resourced [capital], within the bounds of specific networks which have a game-like structure and which impose definite restraints upon them [fields]. (Crossley, 2002: 171)

Practice occurs within the context of *fields*. A field is 'a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them' (Jenkins, 2002: 84). Common examples in Bourdieu's work include the artistic field, the economic field, the religious field, the field of education and the field of power (politics). The resources at stake, which facilitate successful performance within a given field, are the various species of *capital*: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Economic capital is simply that

which is 'immediately and directly convertible into money' (Bourdieu, 1986: 243). This includes cash, as well as property and goods that have a monetary value. Cultural capital exists in three states: the 'embodied' state, comprising the 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (p.243) that together make up the habitus (see below); the 'objectified' state, meaning 'cultural goods' such as books or pictures; and the 'institutionalized' state, for example educational qualifications. Social capital refers to the 'actual or potential resources which are linked to … membership in a group' (p. 248). Finally, symbolic capital is summarised as 'the form that one or another of these [other] species takes when it is grasped through categories of perception that *recognize* its specific logic' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119, original emphasis). In other words, when possession of any of the other three forms of capital is recognised as legitimate, it becomes symbolic capital, which can be understood as prestige or power. Each field has its own specific logic, or unwritten rules, including the specific forms of capital which are valuable within that field. Fields are fundamentally relational and characterised by struggle.

The third key component in Bourdieu's account of practice – an individual's *habitus* – can be defined as 'a system of durable and transposable *dispositions* (schemes of perception, appreciation and action), produced by particular social environments, which functions as the principle of the generation and structuring of practices and representations' (Bourdieu, 1988: 786, original emphasis). In other words, agents are predisposed to act, think and make sense of the world in certain ways, in keeping with a set of 'schemes of perception, appreciation and action' acquired through socialisation, that is, 'the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53) and internalised through repeated practice in a particular field. While habitus is specific to individuals, as the product of their experiences, those occupying similar social positions, and hence sharing similar experiences, tend to have similar dispositions. The habitus generates action that is neither explicitly aimed at 'consciously pursued goals', nor mechanically determined. Instead 'social action is guided by a practical sense, by what we may call a "feel for the game"' (Bourdieu, 1988: 782).

In summary then, people engage in practices in largely unthinking ways, according to a set of dispositions acquired through socialisation and practice in a specific social context and employing unequally distributed forms of economic, cultural and social capital. Bourdieu does allow for more conscious, *reflexive* deliberation, in 'very specific crisis situations when the routines of everyday life and the practical feel of habitus cease to operate' (1988: 783), as acquired dispositions become dissonant with the logic of a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In addition, by systematically exploring 'the unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought' (Bourdieu, cited in Wacquant, 1992: 40), reflexive sociological enquiry offers 'a small chance of knowing what game we play and of minimizing the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve, as well as by the embodied social forces that operate from within us' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 198).

A common criticism of Bourdieu's theory of practice is that it is overly deterministic, attempting to go beyond structure and agency but in reality sacrificing the latter in favour of the former (Jenkins, 2002; Mouzelis, 2007). In response, sympathetic critics have attempted to modify Bourdieu's account to incorporate a greater degree of reflexivity into everyday life, not merely restricted to moments of crisis. Mouzelis (2007) suggests a number of different circumstances that might bring about sufficient dissonance to disrupt the ordinary functioning of the habitus: through, for example, conflictual encounters with particular other inhabitants of a field, which fail to follow the expected form of such interactions; or in the case of 'intra-habitus' contradictions, when incongruous dispositions, held by the same actor, come into conflict with each other. Wilk (2009) is specifically interested in how new consumption practices are 'absorbed' into daily life. Through *cultivation*, 'unconscious habits and routines' are brought 'forward into consciousness, reflection and discourse' (p.149). This might be actively pursued or 'forced upon us' by a disruption (Butler et al., 2014), for example brought about by a conflict between existing routines. Conversely, in *naturalisation*, conscious reflections are subsequently pushed 'back into the habitus' (Wilk, 2009: p.150) allowing for a subtly altered normal life to resume, unencumbered by too much reflexive processing.

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Alternatively, reflexivity might occur on a more ongoing basis, outside of moments of dissonance or disruption. Sweetman (2003) argues for the existence of a 'reflexive habitus', characterised by 'a capacity for – and predisposition towards – reflexive engagement' (p.537). For some but not all people, under the uncertain and ever-changing conditions of late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1997), reflexivity 'ceases to reflect a temporary lack of fit between habitus and field but itself becomes habitual' (Sweetman, 2003: 541). Similarly, but less reliant on a grand narrative of late modern risk society, it can be argued that certain groups of people, as a product of their experiences, develop a more reflexive and critical orientation to the world than others.[12] Notable in this regard is the idea of a 'resistance habitus' amongst activists. Contrary to its 'conservative' role in Bourdieu's work, habitus can instead 'be born in periods of change and discontent and can give rise to durable dispositions towards contention and the various forms of know-how and competence necessary to contention … Movements and protests make habitus that make movements and protests' (Crossley, 2002: 189-190).

Social networks and recruitment

A second dimension of understanding recruitment to practices concerns how would-be practitioners come into contact with practices for the first time, how they subsequently become engaged in the practice and how this engagement is (or isn't) sustained over time. Interpersonal relationships are especially important in these processes, especially in facilitating people's initial encounters with a particular practice: new recruits are often first exposed to a practice by somebody they already know (Shove et al., 2012). As shown in Chapter 3, practice-oriented research into Fairtrade movements has demonstrated the role played by existing social networks in introducing people to new ways of consuming (Clarke et al., 2007b; Wheeler, 2012). Research on skipping has tentatively made the same observation (Edwards and Mercer, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2011).

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[12] Indeed, this is how Adams (2006) interprets Bourdieu's conceptualisation of reflexive sociology, as a particular form of habitus acquired in a field of academic enquiry.

Relationships are also important for sustaining involvement in a practice. For example, Cherry's (2006) research with vegans found embeddedness in supportive social networks to be essential for 'maintaining a vegan lifestyle' (p.161), more important than individual resolve, subcultural norms or shared identity. Her research compared two different groups of vegans, those with a close group of friends who were also vegan, and those without. In the former group, abstaining from animal products was something everyone did: it had become *normal*; eating meat had become unthinkable. The latter group, by contrast, had typically first engaged with veganism individually, for example by reading a pamphlet. They 'rarely discussed veganism with other vegans'; when they did talk about it this usually entailed 'defending their diet or explaining veganism to non-vegans' (p.163). They often saw their own veganism as 'deviant' (p.166).

Beyond becoming engaged in a practice, that is, incorporating it into one's repertoire of possible actions, a remaining area for discussion in this chapter is how to think about daily choices between multiple potential courses of action, in a manner consistent with a practice approach. It is to this challenge that I now turn.

4.5 Navigating multiple practices day-by-day

Existing empirical contributions to documenting economic diversity (see Chapter 3, section 3.6) suggest a need not only to consider how people become engaged in alternative practices, but to investigate how this engagement is maintained and negotiated on a day-to-day basis. This means suspending 'strong theory' and employing 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973; Sedgwick, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2014) to explore 'the messy, gritty and real everyday rhythms' of enacting 'life beyond the capitalist status quo' (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 481). In Chapters 7 and 8 I aim to do so by focusing in detail on participants' accounts of navigating, first, multiple (sometimes competing) motivations for engaging in reclamation practices and, second, numerous potential ways of acquiring and disposing of goods.

My focus in this section is on how such navigation is best conceptualised in a practice-oriented study. As seen in the previous section, a straightforward

application of Bourdieu's theory of practice would imply that negotiating everyday choices is a largely unthinking activity, guided by a 'feel for the game'. Sayer (2010), however, questions this portrayal as only a partial representation of how decisions are made. Above all, he argues, 'we are evaluative beings … We not only act and make sense of things but continually evaluate how things we care about … are faring, and often wonder what to do for the best'; to ignore the role of values and valuations is to 'produce a bland, alienated account of social life' (p.87). To Bourdieu's 'feel for the game' it might be instructive to add a 'feel for how the game is going' (p.92). More broadly, as an 'interested outside observer' of practice approaches, Sayer (2013) identifies a de-politicising, even disempowering, deficit of values in practice-oriented research. The challenge is to find a way to address this without reverting to the language of the 'ABC', of conscious choosers making rational decisions according to 'their' attitudes and values, which Shove (2010) argues is incompatible with social practice-based approaches.

With respect to consumption practices, and specifically to reclamation, this raises a number of questions. How do people's senses of the good or right thing to do – for themselves, for close or distant others – impact on their engagement in particular ways of consuming, and vice versa? In other words, what is the connection between practices and what are conventionally called values? On a different note, how is the worth of objects differently categorised and how does this change over time? When do things become 'unwanted'? How do people act in relation to differently valued things?

In the remainder of this section I consider how existing examples of practice-oriented research have tackled these questions. What are the precedents for considering value and values in a way that is consistent with a practice approach?

Ethical values and practice

Hards (2011) considers how values, in the ethical sense, might be 'reconceptualised within a practice-based framework' (p.25). From this perspective, values are not understood as belonging to or residing within individuals, but are 'expressions of ideas circulating within society as cultural,

ethical and political discourses and norms' (p.26). These ideas can be seen as some of the elements that make up practices-as-entities, a subset of what Shove et al. (2012) call meanings. Individuals 'carry' values in the same way that Reckwitz (2002) suggests they carry practices. Before going further, the strength of this approach is in highlighting values as social phenomena, while at least alluding to their being, in turn, appropriated and mobilised by individual actors, albeit portrayed somewhat passively. It also sits neatly within existing theories of practice. However, conceiving of values as properties of practices, and especially equating them with norms and discourses, risks denying their evaluative function (Sayer, 2013). If values are not markers for navigating between different courses of action, or indeed for discerning between competing norms and discourses, then it makes little sense to conceive of them as values at all.

Leaving to one side what values are, Hards goes on to explore the arguably more helpful question (Miller, 2008) of what they do. Crucially, values and practices exist in a 'co-constructive' relationship: values 'simultaneously shape and are shaped by … performances of practices' (Hards, 2011: 26). On the one hand, her research participants – all involved to different degrees in taking action on climate change – emphasised identification with different groups of environmental values. These varying engagements, Hards argues, 'affected their practice, including the specific campaigns and lifestyle changes they adopted' (pp.28-29). On the other hand, repeated performance of practices, the temporal and spatial context in which this occurred and the social interactions it entailed were found both to reinforce values already held and to facilitate their change. Coming into regular contact with particular constellations of doings and sayings, including the ideas that help constitute them as practices, helped shape the way participants exercised evaluation.

Sayer (2010) takes a different approach, detailing a modified version of Bourdieu's theory of practice to better account for ethical decision making. Whereas Bourdieu (1984) gave attention to the role of the habitus in incorporating and enacting *aesthetic* valuations in the form of taste, Sayer proposes a complementary notion of 'ethical dispositions', cultivated and functioning in a similar way (see also Barnett et al., 2005b). Moreover, our

negotiations of ethical (or unethical) activity are at different times unthinking, conscious, or even semi-conscious, as when 'we intermittently muse on a problem over a long period without clearly resolving it, and eventually "find ourselves acting" in a way which decides the issue' (Sayer, 2010: 91). We monitor and evaluate as we go, doing much 'on automatic' but with 'some degree of attentiveness'; it is 'through these repeated minor evaluations that we confirm or gradually shift our moral inclinations' (p.92).

Just as Hards (2011) notes in relation to values and practices, Sayer (2010) identifies a mutually constitutive relationship between practice and ethical dispositions. The latter, 'once acquired, have some inertia, but their strength depends on the frequency with which they are activated … Change in such dispositions, so that individuals become more, less or differently ethical, tends to be gradual and again to require practice' (p.89). This is suggestive of the part active and sustained engagement in new practices might play in Gibson-Graham's (2006b) politics of the subject, that is, in cultivating a transformed subjectivity. As Sayer, again, observes 'we do not simply decide one day that we are a political activist or a musician, but gradually become them through ongoing engagement in politics or music making' (2010: 97). This gradual process is likely to involve some setbacks. Our embodied dispositions might lag behind our more conscious deliberations. Both reflection and action are required to slowly become 'a different person with different embodied habits of thought' (p.91).

Value, disposal and the (after)lives of things

It is uncontroversial to say that any one object can simultaneously be valued in multiple ways. Marx (1990 [1867]), like Adam Smith before him, famously distinguished between use value and exchange value: on the one hand an object's concrete, qualitative usefulness and, on the other, an abstract, quantifiable measure of its equivalence with other objects of different kinds, enabling exchange between them. Baudrillard (1981) adds a further distinction between symbolic exchange value and sign value, respectively employed in constituting relationships and communicating status or prestige. A wedding ring, for example, is uniquely symbolic of the concrete relationship between two

people. An 'ordinary' ring, by contrast, is non-singular: 'I can wear several of them. I can substitute them'. It is 'a sign in the eyes of others', taking part 'in the play of my accessories and the constellation of fashion' (p.66). Each of the four types of value corresponds to a specific logic:

> a logic of utility, a logic of the market, a logic of the gift and a logic of status. Organized in accordance with one of the above groupings, the object assumes respectively the status of an *instrument*, a *commodity*, a *symbol*, or a *sign*. (Baudrillard, 1981: 66, original emphasis)

More pertinent to the present study – on reclaiming unwanted things – is the observation that objects have specific cultural biographies (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). Over the course of a given object's life, it might pass through numerous successive phases in which the value ascribed to it changes, not only economically, as in the depreciation of a car, but also in terms of its practical usefulness, its role in constituting relationships, in signifying status and so on. Changes in how the object is valued and categorised reflect both the details of its specific biography and the wider social history of that class or type of thing.[13] Furthermore, reclamation implies that things, 'unwanted' by their present owner, are nonetheless 'wanted' by somebody else: the same object can be valued differently, by different people, at the same time.

The variability of value (over time, and between social and spatial settings) is illustrated particularly well by a series of recent practice-oriented studies of disposal. As seen in Chapter 2, Gregson et al's (2007a; 2007b) work problematises the notion of the throwaway society, highlighting the many different conduits through which people move along the goods they no longer want or need, and the care exercised in doing so. Relevant to discussion here are their detailed explorations of how people negotiate multiple ways of disposing of things. Most importantly they find that objects valued and classified

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[13] Appadurai (1986: 36) suggests that these specific biographies and wider social histories can be seen as co-constitutive, in a manner not unlike the relationship between performances and practices-as-entities in contemporary theories of practice: 'it is the social history of things, over large periods of time and at large social levels, that constrains the form, meaning, and structure of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories. It is also the case, though it is typically harder to document or predict, that many small shifts in the cultural biography of things may, over time, lead to shifts in the social history of things'.

in particular ways 'are habitually routed through the same conduits' (2007b: 192). Some use these conduits 'in a hierarchical relation', reflecting the perceived worth of the goods in question (2007b: 194). This might mean, for example, beginning by trying to sell things 'deemed to be of [monetary] value' (2007a: 696). At the bottom of the hierarchy are the 'old and grotty' things which 'can only be divested by resorting to conduits that connect directly to the waste stream' (2007b: 194). Another category includes those goods formerly treasured by their owner, now surplus to requirements, but still imaginable as likely to be wanted by somebody else: 'sav[ing] from "rubbish" that which has previously been valued' by 'transform[ing] the no longer wanted into the imagined gift' (2007b: 194). Further goods might be rejected by certain conduits as inappropriate, for instance some charity shops unable to accept or sell furniture, electrical appliances or safety devices such as children's car seats. Disposing of a particular item, then, might involve several attempts to use different conduits, moving down the hierarchy: 'invariably attempting to place things firstly in sites where they might be re-valued, and only then, if this placement is refused, resorting to the conduit of the tip' (2007b: 194).

In discussing the different degrees of wantedness of things, Gregson et al. (2007b) make a distinction between surplus and excess. Surplus items are those that, while not currently needed or wanted by their present owner, are considered still potentially useable either under different (future) circumstances or by a different person. Excess refers to that which is considered worthless and deemed appropriate for disposal via the bin. Across their study, encompassing different households with diverse repertoires of disposal, participants were consistent in their treatment of excess, once defined as such. What differed, however, from household to household, was how objects were classified as excess rather than surplus and the types and range of objects to which this applied. These differences were both biographically and socially constructed, accounted for by 'specific identities, values and forms of social and cultural capital' (2007b: 196).

In a further study, Evans (2014) applies these same notions of surplus and excess to food disposal, concerned with 'the processes through which stuff that is "food" becomes stuff that is "waste"' (p.11). In the households he observed,

food rarely became excess without first spending some time in an intermediate surplus state. Examples include leftovers from a previous night's meal, and old or half-used (formerly) fresh ingredients superseded by a more recent shop, all put to one side, ready for an imagined future use. Surplus is 'inherently ambiguous', 'not immediately useful' but having the 'potential to be re-valued given a different set of circumstances' (p.52). That said, in the case of food, surplus produce is hardly ever put back to use, 'overwhelmingly' transitioning from surplus to excess and placed in the waste stream from which it is unlikely to return (p.89).

4.6 Conclusions

My intention in this chapter was to set out a practice-oriented approach to studying reclamation practices, framed as a potential site of ordinary prefigurative politics, and to anticipate some of the challenges faced in implementing the approach. I stressed the importance of investigating both the lives of practices – how they are constituted and how they emerge and evolve – and the lives of their practitioners. Recent variants of theories of practice (Schatzki, 1996; 2002; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005a; Shove et al., 2012) provide some useful tools for investigating the former, beginning by defining and delimiting practices with reference to their constituent elements, but then noting both the variations within practices and their points of overlap and connection with other practices as central to understanding change.

Moving attention to the experiences of practitioners raised some important considerations that have only been given limited attention by these recent variants. In order to better understand how people are recruited to practices – especially how some people are more likely than others to be recruited – I turned to Bourdieu's (1984; 1986; 1988; 1990) concepts of field, capital and habitus, as a way of conceptualising how people are to different degrees disposed and resourced to act in particular ways. I also considered some modifications of this theoretical position that allow for the possibility of greater reflexivity on the part of actors, at least in certain circumstances. Especially relevant to my study are Wilk's (2009) notions of cultivation and naturalisation in

understanding, respectively, engagement in new practices and their adoption into normal everyday life.

Similarly, when turning to how people navigate between different courses of action on a daily basis, theories of practice are criticised for their lack of attention to value and values: to how they evaluate different options based on what is important to them. An unresolved challenge is how to approach this question in a manner consistent with a practice orientation, not reverting to a conceptualisation of detached individuals making rational choices in response to external constraints. I reviewed some existing attempts to incorporate value(s) into practice approaches, suggesting a mutually constitutive relationship between what people do and what matters to them.

In light of the above discussion, I now return to the key intended contributions of the thesis, as outlined at the end of Chapter 3. To recap, these were identified as relating to understandings of three particular reclamation practices, the relationship between alternative and mainstream economic practices, and the political potential of everyday life. I am now able to add a further two areas of contribution to the list, each closely related to the latter.

In seeking to better conceptualise ordinary prefigurative politics as an approach to achieving social change, it is important to consider how people change the way they act. While this, on one level, represents a contribution to how we think about everyday life as political (as noted in Chapter 3), it can also be considered a contribution in its own right. My intention here is to develop existing understandings of how practices appear, change, move from place to place, take root, and so on, as well as how people come to engage in these practices, by adding to the empirical evidence base in a different context and with a different emphasis to previous practice-oriented research. In addition, discussion in this chapter has drawn attention to emerging ways of theorising the relationship between value(s) and practices. Another contribution of my research, then, is to explore this relationship further.

Having engaged with some conceptual issues underlying the research and set out its intended contributions, I now move on to consider the empirical work itself. In Chapter 5 I detail the research methods, before presenting in-depth

findings and analysis in Chapters 6 to 9. I return to the contributions made in Chapter 10.

Chapter five: investigating reclamation practices

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I move discussion on from the existing literature to my own primary research. In Chapters 3 and 4 I suggested five main areas of enquiry and debate to which this thesis contributes. These can be summarised as follows:

1. Understandings of three reclamation practices: free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping;
2. Understanding the relationship between alternative and mainstream economic practices;
3. Understanding everyday life as political;
4. Understanding the processes by which new ways of doing things become adopted and spread (from the perspectives of both practices and their practitioners);
5. Understanding the relationship between value(s) and practices.

I have also alluded to a set of more concrete research questions which structure the empirical research and analysis, leading eventually to arrival at the above contributions:

1. What are the key defining features of reclamation practices, how are they distinct from, and in what ways do they overlap with, other ways of acquiring and disposing of goods? (considered in Chapter 6)
2. Why do people engage in reclamation practices?
   a. How, in their own terms, do they make sense of their involvement? (Chapter 7)
   b. How do they navigate between multiple choices on a day-to-day basis; or why, in a given situation, do they acquire or dispose via a particular channel, rather than through the range of other channels available? (Chapter 8)
3. How did these alternatives come to be part of their ordinary day-to-day lives? (Chapter 9)

This chapter details how I went about addressing these questions. I begin in Section 5.2 by considering some of the philosophical and methodological issues raised by a practice-oriented approach. In Section 5.3 I give a detailed description of the methods used and my experiences of carrying out the

research. I then consider some ethical implications (Section 5.4) before in Section 5.5 setting out my approach to analysis.

5.2 Practice-oriented approaches to social research

As detailed in Chapter 4, my study is informed by theories of social practices and how they conceptualise everyday life and social change. I would characterise my research as practice-oriented, seeking to better understand the recursive relationship between socially constituted patterns of activity (practices-as-entities) and the individual enactments (or performances) of which they are composed. I do not adhere strictly to a single theory of practice, but two formulations have been particularly influential: that of Bourdieu; and the more recent contributions by Schatzki, Reckwitz, Warde, Shove and colleagues. In this section I consider some of the epistemological and methodological implications of these approaches for my research design.

Objectivist and subjectivist moments

Bourdieu's central concern was to challenge a number of 'deep-seated antinomies' (Wacquant, 1992: 3) prevalent in social science: the symbolic and the material, theory and research, structure and agency, macro and micro, and so on. His work was most explicitly positioned against the subject/object dichotomy, 'the rock-bottom antinomy upon which all the divisions of the social scientific field are ultimately founded' (Bourdieu, 1988: 780). As he begins the introduction to *The Logic of Practice*:

> Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism. (Bourdieu, 1990: 25)

The two sides of this opposition appear as both epistemological and ontological categories: subjectivism and objectivism 'denote different ways of knowing – or modes of explaining – the world', whereas the adjectives 'subjective' and 'objective' pertain to 'different kinds of social facts or social reality' (Jenkins, 2002: 91).

The epistemological sense of the subjectivism-objectivism dichotomy can be seen in the division between 'social phenomenology' and 'social physics',

identified as two 'modes of knowledge' (Bourdieu, 1990: 25). Social phenomenology, or subjectivism, 'records and deciphers the meanings that agents produce' (p.135), highlighting the 'truth' as experienced by those agents. In doing so it maximises internal validity, or credibility, being 'generally closer to reality, more attentive to the concrete and detailed aspects of institutions than is the objectivist approach', as well as tending to be 'more inventive, imaginative, and creative in its investigations' (Bourdieu, 1988: 781-782). Above all it guards against viewing the scientist as omniscient. On the other side of the opposition, social physics, or objectivism, 'seeks to grasp an "objective reality" quite inaccessible to ordinary experience by analysing the statistical relationships among distributions of material properties' (Bourdieu, 1990: 135). In summary, then, while subjectivism is concerned with lived experience as the source of knowledge, objectivism values distance and detachment.

Although they are described as modes of knowledge, or epistemological positions, Bourdieu's reference to social phenomenology and social physics can also illuminate the ontological sense of the subjective/objective dualism identified by Jenkins (2002). The subjectivist mode of knowledge tends to emphasise the 'subjective' elements of social reality, whereas the objectivist mode typically emphasises the 'objective' elements. Take, for example, the opposition of agency and structure. On the one hand, social phenomenology depicts society 'as the emergent product of the decisions, actions, and cognitions of conscious, alert individuals to whom the world is given as immediately familiar and meaningful. ... [I]t gives pride of place to agency' (Wacquant, 1992: 9). On the other hand, social physics is 'oriented toward the study of objective mechanisms or deep latent structures and the processes that produce or reproduce them' (Bourdieu, 1988: 781). Society is treated as 'an objective structure' (Wacquant, 1992: 7), with agents put 'on vacation'.

Bourdieu proposes a unifying alternative to subjectivism and objectivism: social science 'must overcome this opposition by integrating into a single model the analysis of the experience of social agents and the analysis of the objective structures that make this experience possible' (Bourdieu, 1988: 782). This single model is composed of two 'moments', in dialectical relationship with each other. The first, objectivist, moment entails temporarily leaving to one side

subjective or 'mundane' representations in order to investigate the objective structural constraints that underlie agents' representations and interactions. In the second, subjectivist, moment the 'immediate, lived experience of agents' is reintroduced (Wacquant, 1992: 11) to 'account for the everyday struggles in which individuals and groups attempt to transform or preserve these objective structures' (Bourdieu, 1988: 782). These two moments and, crucially, the dialectical relationship between them, are both necessary for understanding human activity.

More recent variants of practice theory do not explicitly follow Bourdieu's single model composed of objectivist and subjectivist moments. However, the form of this model, if not its detail, can be detected in a central focus on the biographies or 'careers' of both practices and their practitioners: how different (social) patterns of doing emerge, evolve and disappear; and how these are adopted into, accommodated within, and moulded to the shape of (individual) people's lives. As Shove et al. (2012) observe, 'the careers of practitioners and practices are intimately connected on a daily basis. … We try to catch sight of these intersecting tracks by turning back and forth between the lives of practitioners and those of the practices they carry' (p.66).

In my own research I have tried to chart a course between both concerns, as can be seen in the overarching research questions set out in Section 5.1 above. In the first question (analysed in Chapter 6) the emphasis is on three reclamation practices, considering how they have emerged and developed, detailing the elements of which they are composed, exploring the variety of subtly different performances they encompass and investigating their overlaps and interactions with other practices. The remaining questions move attention to the practitioner's lived experience of reclamation practices, specifically the reasons that participants gave for their involvement (Chapter 7), their ongoing negotiation of different courses of action (Chapter 8) and how they became and remained engaged (Chapter 9).

In reality, however, my research has given more weight to the experiences of practitioners than to the lives of practices, although I maintain that each sheds light on the other. This was partly by design. As discussion in Chapter 4

(Section 4.2) suggests, a more in-depth focus on the experiences of practitioners was especially appropriate to my empirical context. It was also partly a result of the chosen research methods (see Section 5.3 below). In conducting in-depth interviews my participants and I amassed a wealth of detailed narratives of their engagements with reclaiming and other practices, foregrounding their experiences, relationships and the things that matter to them.

Capturing the doings and sayings of practice

There is no consensus as to the most appropriate research methods to employ in researching social practices. Many studies have used in-depth interviews, participant or nonparticipant observation, documentary analysis, or a combination of the three.

Evans (2011a), for example, used 'a single long qualitative/ethnographic interview' with each participant, in order to 'develop in-depth understandings of [their] lives and real world experiences' and allow them to 'tell their own story in their own terms' (p.111). This detailed discursive engagement was appropriate to the particular focus of the study, investigating the multiple, interacting meanings and purposes that underpinned participants' attempts to live sustainably. In a different study, focusing on ordinary experiences of domestic food disposal, Evans (2012a) undertook 'sustained and intimate' ethnographic work, arguing that 'a theoretical orientation towards practice necessitates a focus on "doings" as well as "sayings"', requiring 'a methodological approach that locates talk within on-going and situated action' (p.43). The approach combined in-depth interviews with several innovative forms of observation, including tracing the passage of particular items of food into, around and out of the home, and 'going along' with participants as they shopped for, prepared, cooked, ate and disposed of food.

One issue to consider relates to the ability of particular research methods to successfully investigate both practices-as-entities and practice-as-performance. Martens (2012), for example, suggests that interviewing is a useful way of investigating the social organisation of practices (i.e. practices-as-entities and their elements), but is less helpful in accessing the activity (or performance) of

practices. In her research, participants mostly talked in abstract or generalising terms: about what they tend to do, what people in general tend to do, about what they think is the right way of carrying out an activity, the most effective way of doing it, and so on. In other words, they spoke about the practice as a routinised pattern of activity rather than about specific moments of enactment. There were, however, 'glimpses' of performance, when participants gave detailed illustrative examples of particular experiences.

A fruitful way forward, then, might be to design interviews to draw out both the general and the particular. Halkier and Jensen (2011), for example, suggest using different types of questioning – descriptive, structural and contrast questions – to elicit different kinds of response. In my own interviews I encouraged participants to talk in detail about specific encounters (e.g. their earliest experiences of a given practice or their negotiation of different practices in real day-to-day situations), as well as their more general, abstract reflections on the practice. Another approach to capturing performances might be to use other methods, such as participant observation, or video recording aspects of daily life, or to combine these with interviewing by encouraging participants to narrate their action as it happens (Martens, 2012). Shove and Pantzar (2007) describe their research as a 'juggling act', moving between different methods – 'secondary sources, interviews, autoethnography and action research' (p.163) – in order to 'keep multiple representations in view' (p.164).

Following their lead, I used multiple forms of investigation. In defining and delimiting the three practices (Chapter 6) I drew on participant observation, interviews and a number of key documentary sources to arrive at an approximation of each practice-entity, at least in their ideal form. I used interviews with a wide range of participants as a means of understanding the variations in performances of practices as well as their connections with different practices. In considering the lives of practitioners (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) I relied heavily on these in-depth interviews to explore how participants made sense of their own engagement in these practices, how they became engaged, how engagement has been sustained and how it fits alongside other everyday practices. Here I used participant observation to sensitise me to the world of my participants and so better understand the perspectives of practitioners.

5.3 Methods and process

Having set out the research questions and reflected on some pertinent epistemological and methodological issues, I now give a detailed account of the methods employed and issues encountered in the process of doing so. In keeping with a commitment to researcher reflexivity (Finlay, 2012), this is a first person account of conducting the research, including acknowledgement of my own position relative to the participants and the subject matter, and its methodological, interpersonal and ethical consequences (England, 1994). At the same time it is important to recognise the inevitable blindspots in this reflexive account (Rose, 1997). The bulk of the discussion is on the use of in-depth interviews – the main source of evidence for the thesis – followed by consideration of the other methods drawn upon to support the interview material.

In-depth interviews: overview and recruitment

My principal research method was to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants engaged in one or more of three reclamation practices: free online reuse exchange; urban fruit harvesting; and skipping. These interviews account for most of the empirical material analysed and presented in Chapters 6 to 9.

In total I conducted 48 interviews with 52 participants. They ranged in length from 34 minutes to just over two hours, averaging 73 minutes. Most of these interviews were one-to-one conversations between me and a single research participant, but occasionally (in five interviews) I spoke to two or three participants together. I revisited two participants for a second interview, due to time constraints on our initial conversation. 38 participants were engaged in online reuse, 21 in fruit harvesting and 20 in skipping. Interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed. With the exception of a pilot interview in late 2010, all interviews took place during 2012 and 2013.

I used several complementary strategies for recruiting interview participants, with a mixture of purposive sampling (Mason, 2002) and more contingent means relying on word of mouth and 'snowballing' to reach less easily

accessible participants (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). As such, I make no claims as to the representativeness of the participants, but made efforts to include a range of different voices and experiences.

Members of online reuse groups – specifically Freecycle and Freegle – were recruited primarily through an online survey (see below). Respondents were asked if they were willing to be contacted about further research and, if so, to provide their name and email address. I identified key survey variables to help select potential interview participants, who I then contacted and invited to take part in an interview. This ensured that certain groups of participants would be included – frequent givers or recipients were prioritised over those that had rarely been involved – and provided a mix of participants across self-reported socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, income), their stated reasons for engaging in online reuse (ranging from financial need to political action), their area of residence within particular cities, and so on, as well as a mixture of volunteers (moderators, group owners) and 'ordinary' members. For practical reasons, relating especially to the expense of travel, I chose to concentrate the majority of these interviews in the three UK cities that provided the most survey responses (one in the north of England, one in the South and one in Scotland). These locations also allowed me to carry out face-to-face interviews with some key actors in coordinating online reuse nationally.

Recruitment of urban fruit harvesters also relied to an extent on their respective groups' web presence. I made initial contact with 23 fruit harvesting projects using the main contact email address on their website or blog page, 14 of which responded. The email invited groups to take part in the research by allowing me to conduct interviews and/or attend and join in with their harvesting sessions (see discussion of participant observation, below). The person replying to the email – usually someone responsible for coordinating group activities – then effectively acted as a gatekeeper: I asked if I could interview them and/or other harvesters in their group and they identified appropriate participants, usually themselves and in some cases one or two others. Recruiting via a gatekeeper raises questions as to the selective inclusion and exclusion of potential participants (Broadhead and Rist, 1976; Wanat, 2008). These concerns were mitigated since my research did not seek to evaluate the success of fruit

harvesting initiatives and, moreover, I anticipated hearing broader perspectives through informal conversations during participant observation. In addition to the above strategy, I approached potential participants engaged in fruit harvesting through a combination of my own extended personal networks, word of mouth and snowballing (participants suggesting friends of theirs who might be willing to take part). These techniques were crucial to my recruitment of people involved in skipping, which I describe in more detail below. In total I interviewed representatives of 10 different fruit harvesting groups in England, Scotland and Wales.

Skippers were the most elusive subset of participants to identify and make contact with. Unlike members of online reuse groups and volunteers with fruit harvesting projects, skippers are not characterised by their involvement with a recognisable organisation and so do not have any publicly available contact details: they are people who happen to consume in a particular way. I began by drawing on existing contacts – some of my earliest interviews were with friends of friends and a student introduced by a colleague at the University – and then attempted to snowball the sample from there, with some degree of success. As a result, many of this group were known to each other; several were actively involved in fruit harvesting as well as skipping. Another invaluable source of potential participants was again the online survey of Freecycle and Freegle members. One survey question asked how regularly respondents used a number of alternative conduits for acquiring food and non-food goods. I made contact with those who both agreed to being emailed about further research and stated that they 'regularly' or 'occasionally' took food items from skips or bins. The first approach resulted in a fascinating (unplanned) example of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), revolving around skipping, fruit harvesting and other alternative ways of provisioning and organising, whereby participants frequently (and without prompting) made reference to the influential role of others taking part in the research. However, for this reason it also yielded a rather homogeneous view of skipping. The second approach helped in providing a broader range of experiences, both spread further geographically and with a more varied set of engagements with recovering discarded food.

Doing the interviews

Where possible, interviews were carried out face-to-face in an environment chosen by the research participant, typically in their home or a public place such as a cafe (Elwood and Martin, 2000). Five interviews were conducted by telephone, mostly for practical reasons due to our respective locations or the times we were both available, but in one case to accommodate the needs of the participant, who felt more comfortable talking remotely than in person.

I used a simple topic guide (see Appendix 1) which I altered slightly for interviews on the three different practices. I tried to keep questions as open-ended as possible and talk as little as possible, prompting for clarification and steering the conversation in the direction laid out in the topic guide, but allowing participants to speak in their own terms and where possible make their own connections (Edwards and Holland, 2013).

In practice I encountered several barriers to keeping to this ideal interviewing model. First, as a relatively inexperienced qualitative researcher I had difficulty, especially in earlier interviews, articulating questions clearly and concisely. I would sometimes interrupt participants when in full flow, or miss an opportunity to probe further on a topic of particular interest. I found this aspect of interviewing easier as I became more experienced. A second problem encountered was that participants varied in how freely they talked. At one end of the spectrum it was difficult to keep some interviews on track, as we both got caught up in the excitement of what we were discussing. At the other end were less confident participants, or those who felt they had little to say on certain areas. A pitfall to avoid here, which I managed with mixed success and again improved at with time, was giving too many examples in an attempt to reframe the questions or, worse still, asking leading questions, effectively putting words into participants' mouths.

Since qualitative interviews rely on knowledge production within the context of an interview relationship, establishing rapport with participants is especially important (Kvale, 1996; Johnson and Rowlands, 2012). In most cases I found this occurred organically. The main exceptions were telephone interviews, in

which the absence of non-verbal cues and the more stilted nature of conversation made rapport much more difficult to build.

I started interviews by telling participants about myself, about my research and why I was interested in talking to them. Having a personal interest in the topic helped me to demonstrate genuine engagement with the conversation. I also asked permission to record the conversation and use the material in written reports, papers and my thesis. My impression was that this helped put participants at ease, offering something of myself and declaring my interests and interestedness before beginning (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012).

I then began the interview proper by asking an open-ended question, giving the participant an opportunity to tell me about her or his life, about what she or he was involved in, passionate about and so on. Participants responded to this question differently. Some gave a neatly packaged history of their lives; others offered a few basic facts, while others still began to tell me all about their involvement in reclamation practices and how they are woven into their daily lives. In the latter cases, I had to ask few further questions, merely keeping the direction of the conversation on track. In nearly all interviews, though, this opening question helped to break the ice, to open up both parties to conversation. It also provided me, as interviewer, with several lines of enquiry to pursue from the start. Where possible I adapted my use of the topic guide to respond to the terminology introduced by participants themselves, and also adjusted the order of questioning to explore areas that arose unprompted, rather than waiting for the preordained point in the interview. This was all part of allowing the interview to develop as a relational transaction between two (or more) subjects.

Like in any interview relationship it was important to remain aware of power imbalances. As an academic doing detailed research on the topic, I was conscious of having some level of 'expert' status in the eyes of participants, a label which I tried to play down. Conversely, I saw participants as 'experts' in the specifics of the conversation – their engagements with reclamation practices and their life contexts more broadly – and they tended to be on their own territory (Elwood and Martin, 2000). I was also mindful of how the different

people I spoke with related to me as a relatively young, White British, middle class, male researcher, as well as the prejudices I brought to the conversation from my own social position (England, 1994). Worth noting in this regard is the gender profile of the participants; more than two thirds were women.

More specifically to this research, I had a connection to some participants beyond the usual interview relationship. One participant was an existing friend; several others were personally or professionally connected to friends or colleagues of mine. In further cases there were overlaps in our wider social networks or in our communities of place, practice or interest: on a number of occasions I subsequently 'bumped into' research participants at local events, at parties or in the pub, both while the fieldwork was still in progress and more recently. In many respects this proximity to the lives of participants was a strength of the research, sensitising me to the contexts that they spoke about in interviews and making me better able to interpret the material without misrepresenting the intended meaning. However, I also had to be vigilant. There was a danger that I took mutual understanding for granted or failed to clarify points that I thought I had grasped. Here, as in my participant observation (see below), I was careful to 'mak[e] the familiar unfamiliar' (Ely, 1991: 124).

In the same way it was important to reflect on my interestedness and attachment to the subject matter. I was clearly not a neutral outsider, but somebody with often similar political and ethical dispositions to those taking part in the research. While qualitative approaches recognise that values cannot be eliminated from an interview situation, I felt it was necessary – again, with mixed success – to cultivate self-awareness in this respect and try not to project my own views on to the participants (Rose, 1997; Finlay, 2012). Sometimes this meant playing devil's advocate, questioning assumptions that otherwise both the participant and I might take for granted. Equally, I had to be careful not to gloss over issues that might have seemed 'obvious' to me, or finish participants' sentences, allowing them to narrate their experiences in their own terms.

Online survey

As mentioned above, in discussing how interview participants were recruited, another strand of my research involved administering an online survey of

Freecycle and Freegle members. Indeed, the survey was designed as a way of making contact with potential participants for the more in-depth, qualitative research. With this purpose in mind the questionnaire was kept short and simple to maximise the response rate. The survey also provided a broad, descriptive evidence base as to the characteristics of members, their multiple reasons for using online reuse groups to give and receive, their experiences of these transactions and their wider engagement in practices of acquiring and disposing of goods. These variables were useful in identifying and approaching a varied (but not representative) cross section of respondents to invite them to take part in in-depth interviews.

I began the process of recruiting survey participants by negotiating support from Freegle and Freecycle at a national level.[14] I was given approval to contact moderators of individual Freegle groups via email, asking them to post the survey link on their group pages. National representatives also offered to post a message on the moderators' group page – asking moderators in turn to post an 'admin' message with the survey link to their respective local groups – and to advertise the survey via online social media, namely Twitter and Facebook.

In total the survey was completed by 4,608 Freegle members and 4,400 Freecycle members, a total of 9,008 responses. After removing duplicate cases from the combined sample, I was left with 8,985 survey responses. This was far greater than the response rate expected. This success can be attributed to three factors. First, both the quantity and complexity of questions were kept to a minimum, to reduce completion time and encourage participation by as many members as possible, including those with little free time or those less experienced at answering questionnaires. A progress indicator informed participants how many pages were still to be completed. Participants were also advised that they could skip over questions they preferred not to answer. Second, the target population were, by definition, active Internet users and

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[14] There is no space to reflect in any detail on this negotiation here. In brief, I was given almost immediate approval by Freegle, but with Freecycle the approval process was more protracted. This included making some minor alterations to the questionnaire: complying with their trademark policy by adding an '®' after the first appearance of the word Freecycle on each page; and removing a reference to a 'competing cause' (Freegle) on the introductory page.

therefore perfectly suited to an online questionnaire design. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there was a high level of engagement with national representatives of both Freegle and Freecycle. Despite the unexpected success of the survey, I do not present findings from it in the thesis.[15] It remains, however, a useful source to revisit in future analysis.

Participant observation

Alongside interview evidence, my study draws on a modest amount of formal participant observation with fruit harvesting groups and skippers. In addition, I was already an occasional user of an online reuse group. Participant observation is defined as 'establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting' (Emerson et al., 2007: 352). It is an ethnographic method that seeks to understand and describe 'the world of everyday life as viewed from the standpoint of insiders' (Jorgensen, 1989: 14). The participant observer is simultaneously researcher and part of the setting being researched.

My participant observation for this study lacked the long-term embeddedness typical of ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Going on fruit harvests and accompanying skippers on their trips to bins was episodic, missing out the rest of participants' everyday lives, and the opportunity to witness how the two fit together. As a result, I am reluctant to call the study 'an ethnography' and regard this aspect of the research as supplementary to the interviewing, at least as a direct source of data. From another perspective, however, the participant observation helped me acclimatise to the world of research participants, better able to understand their accounts of engagement in each of the three practices and therefore better placed to interpret findings without misrepresenting their experiences.

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[15] While the survey provides insightful evidence about online reuse groups and their members, which I intend to present separately, its role *within the PhD research* was first and foremost in selecting and providing access to potential interview participants. The survey evidence has little to add to the particular themes explored in the thesis.

A major difficulty experienced with participant observation was in securing opportunities to take part. Fruit picking sessions tended to happen at weekends and were restricted to the harvesting season (late summer and autumn), limiting the number of chances I had to participate and observe. However, access was straightforward to obtain: picks are open to all and are announced by email, albeit sometimes at short notice. Local coordinators were receptive to my research and were enthusiastic about me joining in with the activity. In total I attended ten picks and also took part in meetings, training, public-facing workshops and celebrations. Over the course of the study I have been an active member of a small community garden with some degree of organisational overlap with the local fruit harvesting group. While this was not formally part of the fieldwork, it frequently brought me into contact with participants in the research.

Skipping trips were more difficult to arrange for a number of reasons. First, for many participants skipping was a spontaneous activity, when walking past a bin or in an unanticipated spare moment. Some offered to let me know when they were about to go out skipping, but we never successfully coordinated a time to go together. Second, a number of the participants I interviewed about skipping did it quite infrequently, often explaining that they did so more regularly in a previous stage of their life. Third, I was wary of coercing participants, especially in light of the questionable legality and social stigma potentially attached to skipping, so held back from pressuring participants to follow through with offers to go skipping together if they did not materialise. As a result, I only went skipping twice.

5.4 Ethical considerations

Researchers have a responsibility to consider the ethical issues arising from their empirical studies, in order to maintain the integrity of their own research and that of the discipline within which they work, to be accurate and honest in reporting findings, and most importantly to protect the interests of those involved in or affected by the research. However, different research designs raise different issues and, furthermore, researchers vary in their view of, and response to, ethical dilemmas. Recognising this diversity the British Sociological

Association (BSA, 2002) has produced a *Statement of Ethical Practice*, intended as an overarching summary of basic principles. I use the issues it raises to frame discussion of the ethical considerations relevant to my own research design.

Protection from harm

It is imperative that 'the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research' (BSA, 2002: 2). In other words, those taking part should be protected from harm. Some might find the research process itself to be distressing or intrusive and measures should be taken to minimise this, for instance by allowing participants to refrain from any part of the research or withdraw entirely at any stage. Personal information should be kept confidential. Researchers should ensure that findings are anonymised and that, as far as possible, participants' identities cannot be deduced from the information presented. All material should be stored and disseminated in accordance with data protection legislation.

Perhaps the most likely source of potential harm to be anticipated and avoided relates to the breach of research participants' privacy, which may cause embarrassment, but could feasibly have negative impacts on personal relationships, reputation and employment, or even lead to legal problems or physical harm. I decided to anonymise all participants' accounts for inclusion in the analysis. Each participant was given a pseudonym and any obviously identifiable information was redacted from the direct quotes that I used.

Harm can also arise during the research process itself. I was conscious during fieldwork of trying to (co-)create a safe, non-judgemental atmosphere in which participants could speak openly and confidently, while maintaining the ability to ask critical questions where appropriate, and without raising any unrealistic expectations as to my ability to be a friend or counsellor, or to intervene in any problematic situations they discussed. As mentioned below, I also felt it was important to make clear to interview and survey participants that they could refrain from answering any questions deemed too intrusive or terminate their involvement in the research at any point.

Informed consent

Another key principle raised by the BSA guidelines is that of informed consent, freely given by research participants. This requires researchers to 'explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used' (BSA, 2002: 3).

Interviews were, in most cases, arranged in advance by email, including a brief explanation of the research project, why I had chosen to speak to that particular individual, the nature of the interview including roughly how long it would take and that I wished to make an audio recording of it. At the start of the interview all participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the background to and purpose of the research, my intention to record and transcribe the conversation, how I subsequently planned to use this material, and my contact details in full. The information sheet also invited participants to ask questions at any point before, during or after the interview and made clear that they were free to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. After giving out the information sheet I gave an overview of the research project and asked permission to record the conversation, explaining how I planned to use the recording. Finally, before commencing the interview, I asked participants to confirm if they understood and were happy to proceed.

Similarly, the online questionnaire began with an explanation of how I intended to use the data generated and that I would not pass on the information to anybody else. Respondents were given brief instructions on completing the questionnaire, including that they were free to skip any questions they would prefer not to answer. This was reiterated at the top of a page of questions about personal characteristics. Again I included contact details and asked respondents to get in touch with any questions.

Obtaining informed consent for participant observation was less straightforward. As Spicker (2007) points out, the BSA guidance implicitly makes an exception regarding informed consent for observation-based research conducted in public spaces, by warning against covert 'participant or non-participant observation in

non-public spaces' (BSA, 2002: 5, my emphasis). Meanwhile, the Sociological Research Association's (SRA, 2003) *Ethical Guidelines* are more explicit, stating that 'in observation studies, where behaviour patterns are observed without the subject's knowledge, social researchers must take care not to infringe what may be referred to as the "private space" of an individual or group' (p.31) and later that 'there can be no reasonable guarantee of privacy in "public" settings' (p.33).

The fruit harvesting sessions I attended could be described as semi-public: they took place in a mixture of private and public spaces, were open to all and were advertised on publicly-accessible websites and/or via broad mailing lists. Participation was often fluid. Some of the more public-facing events, for instance apple pressing outside a busy railway station, attracted passers-by for a few minutes at a time, while even the more self-contained harvests in private gardens tended to include volunteers coming and going during the course of the session. With this in mind it was difficult to gain prior consent from all participants. I approached local coordinators, all of whom I had already met and were familiar with my research project, and got their permission to join in with events with the understanding that my observations would inform my research. At the events themselves I took a more informal approach, engaging in conversation with fellow participants as we picked or juiced, and in the process explaining my multiple reasons for being there. Ethically this was a compromise. Combined with the fluidity of participation, it meant that I was not able to exhaustively inform all of those present about my research or gain permission prior to commencement. However, more positively it allowed me to introduce my research, without drama, and responsively, to all participants with whom I engaged personally and therefore who most informed the research.

5.5 Analysis

Finally, before I go on to present the findings from my research, it is important to consider the process by which they were constructed: how did a series of in-depth conversations with participants in reclamation practices become condensed into four chapters of written prose?

A first point to make is that the analytical process began before the fieldwork took place. I was selective in developing my research questions, in light of an extensive literature review: what angle would represent an original contribution and what questions made sense to ask from a broadly practice-oriented perspective? Similarly, I made analytical decisions in preparing for interviews, especially in designing the topic guide. It was not a completely unstructured interview design; certain points needed to be covered, according to questions raised in my engagement with the existing evidence base. Furthermore, the topic guide was informed by the results of the online survey. I knew, for example, that nearly three-quarters of survey respondents had said they used Freecycle or Freegle 'to feel like I'm contributing/making a difference'. I wanted to explore this finding further and so included a relevant question in the topic guide. These caveats aside, I took a broadly inductive approach to the fieldwork and subsequent analysis, aiming to keep my research questions and topic guide open and exploratory, rather than deducing a hypothesis to be tested empirically.[16]

I recorded and transcribed my interviews verbatim, before coding the transcripts using the NVivo software package. In listening to the interviews I became more and more familiar with the data and what was emerging from it. Immediately after interviews, and when listening to, transcribing and coding them, I made 'preliminary jottings' and 'analytic memos' (Saldaña, 2009: 17). I noted recurring concepts (including those resonating with or contradicting existing evidence), the questions they raised and my initial analytical reflections, as they occurred to me. In coding the transcripts I initially explored the themes emerging from my notes, which were used to write a conference paper, subsequently reworked as a journal article (Foden, 2012). At the same time I continued to conduct further

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[16] An exception to this inductive approach was in the analysis underpinning Sections 6.2 to 6.4 of Chapter 6, defining and delimiting the three reclamation practices. Here I adopted an intentionally structured approach to ensure that, for each practice, I consistently covered each of the three types of elements (materials, competences and meanings) specified by Shove et al. (2012). I started with these three headings and, one practice at a time, mined a number of sources for relevant insights: my coded interview transcripts; fieldnotes from participant observation; and written guidelines for would-be practitioners.

interviews; I used the same basic topic guide but incorporated insights from the initial analysis, especially in probing beyond the headline questions.

I then completed a more detailed bottom-up coding exercise. I began with what Charmaz and Belgrave (2012) call 'initial or open coding' (p.356) working through the text sentence-by-sentence, describing and distilling what the participant said and meant. In the first five interviews I generated over 150 codes. I decided this was too unwieldy and collapsed initial codes into slightly broader categories, then applying these as a form of 'selective or focused coding' (p.357) to the remaining interviews, but still generating further codes when new concepts appeared. This more selective process was driven by a combination of my interpreting the data and the particular themes I wished to address in response to existing literature.

Writing and re-writing was itself an important part of analysis (Charmaz, 2006). As I began to write in more detail around the themes I further refined them – combining and subdividing as appropriate – attempting to convert a loosely connected set of ideas into a coherent and linear narrative. As I progressed I began populating my findings chapters (one for each broad research question; see Section 5.1) with relevant interview material, moving repeatedly back and forth between written interpretation of the material, returning to theoretical concerns raised in the literature review (and subsequent reading), further refinement of my codes, and piecing together a story. I took stock at regular intervals, writing short papers and presentations on my emerging findings. This was an opportunity to gain feedback and subject the analysis to more critical questioning, honing my interpretations further.

While my analysis was largely thematic, reliant on coded data abstracted from its context, I regularly revisited the interview transcripts to ensure that analysis was always situated in participants' life stories. This was especially important for the analysis presented in Chapter 9, concerned with participants' biographies and the 'disruptive life events' they experienced (Riessman, 2012: 368).

5.6 Conclusions

I began this chapter by summarising the five intended contributions of the thesis and identifying a more concrete set of research questions that have structured the empirical work and the presentation of findings. I considered the philosophical and methodological questions raised by a practice-oriented approach to research, before presenting the research design and giving a detailed, reflexive account of undertaking the empirical work for the study. I highlighted a series of ethical considerations and finished by discussing my approach to the analysis.

In the process, the discussion has served as a bridge between Chapters 2 to 4, in which I considered the existing literature and developed a set of key areas for contribution, and Chapters 6 to 9, in which I present findings and analysis. It is to this task that I now turn, beginning with a focus on the lives of reclamation practices.

Chapter six: the social lives of reclamation practices

6.1 Introduction

The intention in this chapter is to introduce and begin to analyse the three practices that make up the empirical focus of my research, all of which are under-researched. Following a practice-oriented approach, as detailed in Chapters 4 and 5, I am interested in the social lives of both practices and their practitioners. In this chapter I focus on the former. This includes: identifying the defining features of each practice and delimiting its boundaries; observing how changes in a particular constituent element impact on a practice's other elements; exploring variation in how people perform each practice; highlighting how these three practices relate to, overlap and exist in tension with various other practices; and investigating how reclamation practices have spread from location to location.

I begin by looking at each of the three practices in isolation. In Sections 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 I consider, respectively, free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping, defining and delimiting each practice with respect to three types of constituent element: materials, competences and meanings. To recap, *materials* are 'objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself' (Shove et al., 2012: 23). *Competences* include 'skill, know-how and technique', while *meanings* refer to 'symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations' (p.14). In doing so, I draw on a combination of my own observations, in-depth interviews and analysis of key documentary sources. In particular these sources include: the online *Freegle Volunteer Wiki* and *Freecycle FAQ*;[17] the *Abundance Handbook* (Culhane and Watts, 2009) and the *Abundance Manchester Toolkit* (Clarke, 2010); the self-published zines *Dumpster Dive* (Rouse, n.d.) and *Why Freegan?* (koala!, n.d.); and the *Trashwiki* online resource.[18]

In Section 6.5 I move on to consider the interdependencies between different elements, looking at how change in a particular element impacts on the others and on the practices they constitute. As an illustrative example I focus on

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[17] *Freegle Volunteer Wiki*: http://wiki.ilovefreegle.org/; *Freecycle FAQ* (incorporating Member FAQ and Moderator Manual): https://wiki.freecycle.org/
[18] http://trashwiki.org/

experiences of allocating and requesting goods via online reuse networks, highlighting some intended and unintended consequences of removing money as a means of allocation. In Section 6.6 I explore how, relative to the 'ideal' model of each practice, actual performances vary and overlap with other practices. I highlight not only what makes them distinctive but also the commonalities shared. Finally, in Section 6.7, I look at how practices move from place to place, giving attention to how fruit harvesting groups have become established in different cities.

6.2 Free online reuse exchange

The first reclamation practice that I consider here is what I term *free online reuse exchange*: the giving and receiving of surplus second-hand goods, free of charge, usually between strangers, facilitated by an Internet-based communication mechanism. In my research I focus on acts of reuse exchange enabled by two particular 'gifting communities', Freecycle and Freegle. Both are networks of local, volunteer-run groups that use electronic message boards and mailing lists to 'match people who have things they want to get rid of with people who can use them'. Members post messages to their local group offering or requesting specific items; other members respond to these posts; givers and recipients meet in person to complete the transaction.

Freecycle originated in the US in May 2003 as a way of finding new homes for unwanted things (office equipment, domestic furniture) not catered for by existing recycling schemes or second-hand retail spaces (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). It started when founder Deron Beal sent an email 'to about 30 or 40 friends and a handful of nonprofits in Tucson, Arizona' and has since expanded internationally, with groups in more than 100 countries (*Freecycle FAQ*). Freegle was established in September 2009 as a UK-based alternative by ex-Freecycle volunteers unhappy with what they felt was an erosion of local autonomy. Groups migrated from one organisation to the other, retaining membership and functionality (Glaskin, 2009; Lewis, 2009). Today the two coexist, with many UK towns and cities having both Freecycle and Freegle groups. They differ in organisational structure and higher level decision-making processes, but bear a close resemblance in their ethos and day-to-day

operation. Several participants in my research, for example, were members of both Freecycle and Freegle groups and experiences of the two were typically discussed interchangeably.

Materials

Of the distinguishing material features of free online reuse, perhaps the most immediately apparent is the interface used to connect people: online messages posted to a group forum and emailing list. The particular means of communication sets Freecycle and Freegle apart from other informal, second-hand exchange mechanisms. Message boards and mailing lists are, for example, more dynamic than printed classified adverts in newspapers, but less interactive than auction sites such as eBay. The online infrastructure also distinguishes Internet-facilitated reuse from traditional ways of passing goods on to family and friends as 'hand-me-downs', putting the giver in contact with a much wider audience of potential recipients, and vice versa.

In addition to this larger scale infrastructure – a network of networks joined by common communication protocols and thousands of miles of fibre optic cable – a series of more tangible tools are put to use in day-to-day performances of consumption practices. The connectivity central to free online reuse, for instance, presupposes access to related technologies, not least a device capable of transmitting, receiving and processing digital information, such as a computer, smartphone or tablet, as well as a point of connection (wireless or wired) to the Internet. A car or other means of transport is sometimes required, especially for collecting bulky items.

Material elements also include the objects of consumption. Items given and received via Freecycle and Freegle vary enormously. Examples cited in interviews range from scraps of fabric and empty jam jars, via baby clothes and children's toys, to furniture, domestic appliances, bikes and cars. The goods themselves do not, on the surface, differ from those acquired and disposed of in other ways. In most cases the objects were, in a previous stage of their lives, bought and sold in the formal monetary economy. However, as later discussion (especially Chapter 8) makes clear, it is the meanings that they are (or aren't) invested with, the different ways they are valued by different people, the stories

behind them and their particularity (e.g. not just *a* table, but *this* table) which mark them out (see also Miller, 1987; Sassatelli, 2007).

Competences

Amongst the competences (Shove et al., 2012), procedures (Warde, 2005a), practical understandings and rules (Schatzki, 1996; 2002) that help constitute practices, it is the latter, the formalised rules or guidelines, which most clearly highlight how free online reuse differs from other, materially similar practices. All items must be given free of charge. Transactions offering or requesting money in return are forbidden, as are swaps of goods for other goods (*Freecycle FAQ*, *Freegle Wiki*). This immediately sets free online reuse apart from many other ways of exchanging goods. First, the absence of money distinguishes it not only from formal retail, but also from much second-hand economic activity. Second, the one-way nature of the transaction – the explicit instruction that 'there are no strings attached' (*Freecycle FAQ*) – stands in contrast to reciprocal gift-giving between family and friends (Guillard and Del Bucchia, 2012).

Online reuse also entails competences in the narrower sense: skills, abilities and know-how. These arise in response to, and as a complement of, the objects, technologies and rules discussed above. Realising the dormant usefulness of things often presupposes a creative eye and the manual skills to fix up or re-purpose (Strasser, 1999). And just as forums and mailing lists require Internet access, they also rely on users' computer literacy and familiarity with the conventions of online communication.

Moreover, changing the rules of exchange requires new ways of deciding who gets what. The giver is responsible for choosing between numerous potential recipients. Unlike an online auction, where an item goes quite literally to the highest bidder, here the connection between ability to pay and acquisition is removed. The giver is forced to find other criteria for choosing. In response both giver and recipient become skilled in a new grammar of requesting and allocating goods.

Meanings

Freecycle's stated mission is 'to build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources and eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to benefit from the strength of a larger community' (*Freecycle FAQ*). There are a number of revealing images here, but I focus on three: waste, community and the gift. First, waste and its harmful ecological impacts are, as one would expect, a central concern. Freecycle's mission statement deems prevailing levels of rubbish generation to be problematic, leading to environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources. In response, reuse is positioned as an ecologically responsible practice that helps mitigate these problems. Similarly, Freegle describes itself as an 'umbrella organisation protecting the environment' by promoting and supporting local online reuse groups. Freegle's aims include encouraging 'the keeping of usable items out of landfill' and promoting 'sustainable waste management practices' (*Freegle Wiki*), again reflecting interrelated concerns with waste and sustainability. These aims draw attention to another sense that waste is problematic, aside from the direct ecological consequences of landfill and resource depletion: that 'usable items' are going unused. Reuse is about reclaiming value that was temporarily hidden, forgotten or inaccessible.

Second, Freecycle aims to help its members 'benefit from the strength of a larger community'. Of interest here is how 'community', a notoriously slippery concept, is defined. As captured in the above mission statement, online reuse is about increasing the number of people with whom one can potentially exchange resources. For most interview participants (with some exceptions; see Chapter 7, Section 7.2), interactions with fellow users were brief and functional; they tended to be formal, relatively anonymous, and focused on the accomplishment of particular ends. If reuse networks are communities, they call to mind Granovetter's (1973) weak ties, Wellman and Leighton's (1979) 'liberated' communities and Tönnies' notion of *Gesellschaft*, rather than something approximating the traditional, more closely-knit *Gemeinschaft* (1963 [1887]).

A third image – that of promoting a 'gifting movement' – provides a fuller picture of how reuse networks might be considered communities: 'By giving freely with

no strings attached, members of The Freecycle Network help instill a sense of generosity of spirit as they strengthen local community ties' (*Freecycle FAQ*). On the one hand, drawing on Cohen's (1985) emphasis on the symbolic dimension of community, members of reuse networks unite around shared meanings: aversion to waste; 'generosity of spirit'; even the idea of (lost) community itself. On the other hand, their network/community is sustained only through repeated yet discrete, concrete, face-to-face interactions between people. Whereas reciprocal obligation has traditionally been associated with building and maintaining solidarity (Komter, 2005), in online reuse it is giving 'with no strings attached' that is explicitly equated with 'strengthen[ing] local community ties' (*Freecycle FAQ*). Reuse networks assume a generalised understanding of reciprocity, where members identify with the group itself, as opposed to with specific others within it, and it is this identification that sustains their future involvement (Willer et al., 2012).

6.3 Urban fruit harvesting

A second reclamation practice included in my research is *urban fruit harvesting*. Surplus or unwanted fruit, either growing in public spaces or on private land, is harvested by groups of volunteers and distributed to people who can use it. Volunteers keep a proportion of the pickings, as do the tree owners (in the case of a private garden). The rest is donated to a variety of local services and projects – for example, those supporting homeless people or asylum seekers – or used to make fresh juice and preserves, which is then either given away or sold to raise funds.

My research focuses especially on fruit harvesting as carried out by the Abundance project in Sheffield, and by a series of loosely affiliated projects in other UK cities. Sheffield Abundance was established in 2007 by two artists, Stephen Watts and Anne-Marie Culhane. As the *Abundance Handbook* explains, 'Stephen had been spotting fruit trees across the city over a number of years and harvesting them for his own needs, and together they decided to find a way to share the bounty with others' (p.7). The following year Abundance Manchester followed suit, 'inspired by Sheffield Abundance, who were keen for others to use their idea, and their name, as long as they shared the same core

values as Sheffield' (*Abundance Manchester Toolkit*, p.3). The projects collectively received national recognition in 2010 when they were awarded the Observer Ethical Award in the Grassroots Project category (Siegle, 2010).

Materials

One of the more distinctive elements of urban fruit harvesting is the setting. Whereas much of the core activity of online reuse happens in virtual space – in the Internet-mediated connections and interactions between dispersed, albeit geographically close, individuals – it is the specificity of the physical space and the objects contained within it that most markedly distinguishes fruit harvesting from other, more prevalent ways of acquiring food in twenty-first century Britain. Fruit is picked in numerous public and private settings – 'backyards, church grounds, hospital car parks, industrial estates, waste land, streets, scrub, derelict property, private businesses, public authority housing, parks, green spaces' (*Abundance Handbook*, p.5) – but most commonly in private domestic gardens. Some fruit might have already fallen to the ground, but the rest is found hanging in trees, sometimes barely accessible branches on very tall trees. Unlike the washed, packed and carefully arranged displays of fruit in a supermarket, acquisition here is palpably linked to production. It is also characterised by exposure to variable weather conditions and by encountering other animals (insects, birds) intent on eating the fruit. Picking can be helped or hindered by the presence of walls, fences, sheds, benches, climbing frames and so on.

Fruit harvesters use a variety of bought, borrowed, found and home-made tools for collecting and distributing produce. In many cases these are a direct response to anticipated or experienced problems of access, especially when picking apples and pears from tall trees. Picking sticks, or 'long poles with a bag on the end' (*Abundance Handbook*, p.30), are used to reach individual pieces of fruit from ground level. Some volunteers might climb the tree and hand-pick fruit, placing it in bags ranging from specialist fabric ones that strap around the body to reused supermarket carriers. A climber might also shake less accessible branches while a team of volunteers below hold an outstretched tarpaulin ready to catch falling fruit and reduce the chance of bruising. Following

the harvest, fruit is sorted into plastic or wooden crates which are then transported by car or by bicycle and trailer. Kitchen equipment is needed for preparing chutneys and preserves; an apple press is used for making fresh juice at awareness-raising and celebration events.

As seen earlier the goods exchanged via online reuse networks are not necessarily different from those acquired and disposed of through other channels. By contrast, participants understood the fruit they collected as materially distinct from that on sale in supermarkets (see Chapter 7). Urban fruit harvesting groups celebrate the diversity of fruit that they find in gardens and public spaces, compared with the relatively small number of different varieties available commercially. For example: 'We have found at least fifty varieties of apples and more than twenty varieties of pears' (*Abundance Handbook*, p.3). The fruit they harvest is also seen as showing greater diversity in its size, shape and cosmetic appearance, in opposition to supermarket controls over the uniformity of produce on sale.

Competences

While not governed by formal rules in the same way as exchange via online reuse networks, urban fruit harvesting groups have shared sets of procedures and guidelines, codified in the *Abundance Handbook*. This was produced by Sheffield Abundance in 2009 and is cited as a major influence on the ways that other groups operate (see Section 6.7). It includes detailed instructions and suggestions on publicity, enlisting volunteers and tree owners, preparing for a harvest, fruit picking methods, transport, storage and distribution. One example is how fruit is divided by quality into different categories:

> We find that it is more efficient if the fruit is sorted at the site into three categories: "Firsts", "Seconds" and "Juicers"/Immediate Users. "Firsts" are the best totally undamaged fruit. This is the fruit that you want to store or distribute. "Seconds" are like firsts but perhaps small, insect-damaged, surface-damaged or scabby. "Juicers"/Immediate Users includes any fruit that is broken through the skin or split, bird-eaten or heavily bruised from windfall, as well as fruit that is extremely ripe and won't keep. Fruit in this category has to be used as soon as possible. The sorted boxes are preferably labelled with

the name of the area, the tree, the variety, if known, and the date. (*Abundance Handbook*, p.34)

A key principle enshrined in the *Handbook* relates to the preservation of the source of fruit. This takes numerous practical forms. Efforts are made to allow others to continue to use the tree(s) in question. When fruit is taken from private gardens, for instance, owners are always given first choice of the best quality fruit, and 'if there is any evidence that a public tree is being harvested by others we do not harvest it' (*Abundance Handbook*, p.8). Care is also taken to protect the plant and the ecosystem that depends on it. Rather than stripping it bare and making use of everything, 'some fruit is always left on the tree for wildlife and to drop and rot back into the soil' (p.8).

Again various practical skills are needed for fruit picking. Much like with the use of tools, the need for certain skills arises from the work required to collect fruit, in contrast to that needed to buy it from a commercial provider. These might include tree climbing, getting the 'knack' of using a telescopic picking stick, learning collectively how best to stand and hold a tarpaulin under a particularly shaped tree and in a particularly laid out garden. While some theoretical knowledge is required, there is little in the way of formal training and a strong emphasis on trial and error, and learning by doing.

Meanings

In parallel with Freecycle's mission statement and Freegle's aims, the meanings of fruit harvesting can be gleaned from a set of nine guiding principles which helped steer the establishment of the Sheffield group (*Abundance Handbook*, pp.8-9). Reducing waste and caring for other humans and nonhumans are, again, prominent themes in representations of urban fruit harvesting. Achieving 'zero waste' (p.8) does not, however, necessarily mean appropriating all produce for human consumption. It includes leaving food for nonhuman animals and allowing nutrients to return to the earth for future growth. In common with its representations in online reuse, waste is not simply understood as troublesome matter to be dealt with, but concerns the lost (nutritional and symbolic) value in things. As the *Handbook* states, 'the project is simply a rediscovering of this

value of trees for food, and a claiming and celebration of a shared inheritance that many of us never knew we had' (p.5).

Preservation of fruit trees (see Competences above) is not merely an instrumental means of ensuring a future supply of free food, but is premised on an understanding of trees as 'shared resources' and on an ethical commitment to care for fellow members of an 'ecological community' (p.5). Urban fruit harvesting also mobilises and propagates discourses around climate change and resource depletion, notably in reference to local food, 'food miles' and the notion of personal environmental impact, captured in the widely recognisable imagery of the 'carbon footprint':

> One of the aims of Abundance is to highlight the huge distances our food usually travels before it reaches our mouths … Abundance also aims to reduce the urban carbon footprint by making use of local food and encouraging more local growing, cultivation and harvesting. (*Abundance Handbook*, p.8)

Fruit harvesting groups are also characterised by a commitment to gifting (p.8). Fruit is collected and given away for free. The local coordinators I interviewed saw this as a valuable contribution to people in need – especially when given to organisations supporting parents with young children, asylum seekers or homeless people – but also a way of capturing attention and starting conversations about food and where it comes from.

6.4 Skipping

The third reclamation practice covered by the research is commonly known in the UK as *skipping*, although its practitioners also use a variety of related names including skip diving, bin diving, bin picking, or in the US, dumpster diving. All of these terms describe a common activity: salvaging usable goods that have already been thrown away by their previous owner, that is, they have been placed in a container commonly understood to be for waste disposal, usually a bin, skip or rubbish bag. Skipping entails accessing and searching these containers, on or close to the original owner's premises, and taking away items that are deemed useful or valuable by the skipper, for consumption.

My focus is primarily on a particular type of skipping: taking goods, especially food, disposed of by commercial actors (e.g. supermarkets), often without their permission. My research touches on the related practice of reclaiming non-food goods and materials from open skips outside people's homes, but this is not a major focus. A further distinction is between people skipping for food out of 'necessity' (lack of income, hunger) and out of 'choice' for broadly ethical, political, social or other reasons. While this distinction is not always absolute (see Chapter 7), the present research tends to concentrate on the latter category.

Unlike online reuse and urban fruit harvesting, skipping is not coordinated by a formal organisation and its practitioners do not necessarily see their activity as part of a movement beyond their immediate social circle. The majority of participants in my research recognised their actions as being part of a social practice – sharing defining traits with other acts happening elsewhere, a wider phenomenon which they had heard about, read about, could talk about, and so on – but did not affiliate to a group or mission statement. That said, skipping has historically been associated with a broader anti-consumerist lifestyle or movement known as 'freeganism', where people try to live as far as possible without reliance on money (see Chapter 3). Attempts at codifying and formalising skipping practice, have emerged through grassroots forms of self-publishing and distribution, especially DIY zine networks and more recently online. Freegan.info is a key web-based resource for sharing information and arranging to meet up with others, run by a group of freegans from New York City.

Materials

As with urban fruit harvesting, a distinguishing material element of skipping is its physical setting. Compared with online reuse and fruit harvesting, skipping is spatially less far removed from conventional sites of monetary exchange: it means visiting precisely the same commercial premises as the customer, but heading 'round the back' to the hidden, behind-the-scenes and sometimes fenced-off areas. For the skipper, the site of acquisition coincides with the

retailer's site of disposal. Food and other goods can be found in bins and skips of varying size, often further concealed/protected within plastic bags.

Tools are not always required to successfully salvage food from a bin: at its most basic it can be as simple as lifting a lid, picking out an item of food and eating it. However, some equipment can be beneficial, depending on the setting (see especially *Dumpster Dive*; *Trashwiki*). On the one hand, this reflects the questionable legality of skipping and the measures taken by retailers to protect their discarded produce from what they might regard as theft. Skipping often occurs at night, when shops are closed or less busy and cover is provided by darkness. In these instances, a torch is recommended to aid visibility. In some cases bins are locked shut to prevent access, in which case the skipper might carry a generic 'triangular' key (commonly used for utility meter cupboards) that can be used to unlock them. On the other hand, choice of equipment might reflect concerns with cleanliness. Old clothes and gloves are recommended to avoid contact with spilt produce or other 'dirty' matter that might be found in a skip, as are wet wipes or water to clean up.

Discarded food salvaged by skippers is often materially identical to that on sale in the shop. What differs is the worth attached to it by different actors. In contrast with common understandings of discarded food as unsafe and unclean, skippers see something enjoyable and exciting (see Chapter 8).

Competences

As previous research has attested (Gross, 2009; Barnard, 2011; Crane, 2012; Carolsfeld and Erikson, 2013), skipping is characterised by a consistent set of 'unwritten rules', shared via zines and online. Both the *Dumpster Dive* zine and the *Trashwiki* online resource include similar pages on etiquette. As with fruit harvesting, a major concern is to preserve the source of food and to protect it for other users. One recurring 'rule', then, is to 'take only what you need' (*Dumpster Dive*, p.2), leaving behind sufficient food for other visitors and not creating further waste by taking too much. Other points of etiquette are to avoid making noise and to tidy up afterwards (*Trashwiki*), out of respect for employees, who are invariably low paid, and to avoid drawing attention to the

bin being used for food, which may prompt an owner to take measures to make it inaccessible.

Practical skills required for skipping mostly relate to discernment: knowing which food to take and which to leave behind, without fully relying on the guidance given by a use-by date. Interview participants highlighted the embodied capacity to (quite literally) follow their nose, as a way of determining the edibility of a given item. The point is made well by two extreme examples. Laura, with her self-confessed 'really really strong sense of smell' felt she could 'trust [her] own senses' more than an arbitrary use-by date. Gabriella, who had 'no sense of smell', was 'paranoid about food poisoning' and so was more cautious about what she took and what she left.

Meanings

Once again, a key idea underpinning skipping relates to tackling waste. *Trashwiki*, for example, in listing five reasons that 'it is cool to be a dumpster diver' notes that salvaging discarded food is 'ecological, a form of waste reduction'. In common with its representations in online reuse and fruit harvesting, here waste is understood as an environmental problem. Reducing waste (and reducing consumption) means 'treading lightly on the Earth', recalling a popular narrative of personal environmental impact, as employed in relation to fruit harvesting. Consumption implies 'the transformation of natural land and resources into money for corporations and acres of trash in landfills. (This is not a good thing.)' (*Why Freegan?*, p.3).

What is distinctive, though, is the framing of waste as a direct consequence of consumerism and/or capitalism. More generally, skipping is the most explicitly oppositional of the three practices, at least as codified in zines. *Why Freegan?* represents freeganism as 'essentially an anti-consumerist ethic' (p.3). It is the 'ultimate boycott' against 'the capitalist system, the all-oppressive dollar [and] wage slavery' (p.4). *Why Freegan?* also suggests shoplifting and employee theft as potential complementary activities, calling into question prevailing understandings of property ownership and the legitimacy of the rule of law. *Dumpster Dive* is less confrontational, but still explicitly critical of 'capitalist excess', advocating skipping as 'one of many ways to not contribute to the

market economy' (p.1). *Trashwiki* is more politically neutral, representing skipping as free (in both senses), ecological and fun.

6.5 Intended and unintended consequences

In Chapter 4 I identified one of the uses of mapping practices and their elements as the ability to isolate changing elements and trace what happens as a result, beginning to shed light on how practices evolve. Take, for example, the practice of acquiring fruit. Conventionally, perhaps, fruit is a commodity to be bought for money in a supermarket. Recognition of the abundance of freely available apples and pears in urban gardens expands the meaning of what food is and what it isn't. Acting on the basis of this expanded concept of food entails trying to acquire and put into use the fruit growing in the local area. This, in turn, requires the development of skills and technologies for accessing the produce, determining its quality and putting it to use. A change in meaning therefore has implications for the other elements (competences, materials) associated with the practice of acquiring fruit.

In this section I present a more detailed example drawn from interviews with members of online reuse groups, exploring the intended and unintended consequences of removing money from exchange.

Free online reuse as a moneyless economy

As identified in Section 6.2, a key feature distinguishing free online reuse from several other forms of second hand exchange is the rule that all items must be given free of charge. It has the potential to radically reconfigure the relationship between the person getting rid of an item (in this context the giver; in others the seller) and those potentially on the receiving end. At the same time it redefines the resources required for acquisition or, in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, the forms of capital valuable for successful participation in the practice. Reuse networks reduce the emphasis on ability to pay (possession of economic capital) and on being sufficiently connected to friends and family members who might pass things on for free (social capital). Interview participants testified positively to each of these features of online reuse. Many had benefited from receiving goods they could not otherwise have afforded (or would not have prioritised

spending on) and from being connected with a wider pool of potential donors and recipients than their existing social networks allowed (see Chapter 7 for detailed discussion).

However, removing money as a basis for allocating goods brings new dilemmas and necessitates the cultivation of new competences: how to decide who to give to; how to maximise one's chances of being chosen. Participants reflected on these issues as both givers and recipients, highlighting considerable variation in how people do online reuse.

For some givers, the most convenient approach was simply to choose the first person that emailed in response to their offer, especially popular when givers 'just want something gone' as quickly as possible. The apparent simplicity and objectivity of money is replaced by something equally straightforward, detached and, in a sense, fair: first come, first served. Some, though, felt this method unjustly excluded certain group members from full participation. They spoke of their own frustrations in repeatedly missing out on items to those better placed to regularly check and respond to new messages as soon as they are posted, or showed concern for others without this advantage. Unequal access is likely to reflect wider social inequalities, with IT use structured by unequally distributed material and cultural resources (White and Selwyn, 2013):

> …perhaps the person who needs it [a hypothetical item] the most is someone like myself. I'm a single parent who doesn't drive, although I do have Internet access. Someone who doesn't have Internet access who can only go to the library once a week to check their emails can often miss out on things. (Vicky)

Vicky's lack of transport raises another material barrier to access, again partly linked to social position (Lucas, 2012). This is especially an issue when the item in question is bulky, or when the giver and recipient live in different parts of a city. Another user with immediate access to transport might be better placed to promise speedy, hassle-free collection than someone having to make special arrangements to borrow a car, secure a lift or ask if the giver would be willing to deliver:

> It's alright if you've got a car and you can go and pick them up. It's alright if you live in [neighbourhood] where lots of things seem to be

being swapped. But if you're trying to get something and you haven't got transport and you can't pick it up, or you live outside the central bit of [city], it's really quite difficult. (Alice)

Both Freecycle and Freegle have attempted to mitigate the effects of unequal access by recommending a 'fair offer' policy. Although not compulsory, users offering goods are encouraged 'to take a period of time to see what responses [they] get before deciding who to give item(s) to', thus giving 'those who don't have continual access to the Internet a fair chance to reply' (*Freecycle FAQ*). In other words, in addition to banning money and swaps, givers are advised against relying on 'first come, first served' to select a recipient.

Again, this raises the question of how to allocate goods. While typical rationales for choosing the first person to respond were ease or saving time, other participants highlighted similar practical advantages of careful deliberation. A recurring complaint was of 'no shows': people requesting an item and then failing to collect it. As they grew in experience, givers felt more able to discern who was likely to turn up, for example judging the perceived effort put into responding to an offer post.

Beyond maximising convenience, perceptions of the potential recipients were important factors in determining allocation. In Gabriella's words, 'I would choose probably the nicest one, or the one I thought was more in need of that object'. Often the person chosen was considered the most polite, the one with whom the giver most readily identified, or the most articulate about their need for the item in question and their intended use for it.[19]

From the opposite perspective, Vicky felt she was more likely to be given an item if she cited her material circumstances – 'if I email someone and say I'm a single mum on benefits' – although she was reluctant to give a 'sob story'. Her examples underline the role of learning and practical experience in becoming skilled givers and recipients:

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[19] Guillard and Del Bucchia (2012: 57) find a similar set of criteria for choosing recipients: 'same age, same values, same history, same passion or interest in the object, same utilisation, same social situation, or the first who answers the ad, the one who does not make a spelling mistake, who explains how they will use it, who lives nearby or who is interested in fighting pollution, or else the person who expresses gratitude'.

There's one woman who is quite an active user on Freecycle and she specifies that if you email her asking for it and you don't put a story then you won't get it … Presumably because she's experienced, she's used to getting a lot of responses so it kind of helps her decide.

You learn as you use it … half of it is [making] your case, you know, like saying I'm a single mum – blah blah blah – but also half of it is people wanna know what you're gonna use it for, who your family are … And if they can kind of picture you and get your story then that gives them satisfaction. (Vicky)

Freed from the constraints of ability to pay or 'first come, first served' as principles for allocating goods, online reuse can facilitate 'care-full' transactions not unlike passing on treasured things via existing relationships (Gregson et al., 2007b). However, these different methods for choosing 'who gets what' risk further unintended consequences. Many participants were not comfortable with judging, or being judged by, fellow group members. Choosing recipients on the strength of their apparent politeness, ability to craft a written response, or shared circumstances might depend greatly on their possession of particular forms of cultural capital and lead to bias by social class, nationality or ethnicity:

It's almost like when people put things on it they're judging the responses. So if they get a response from someone who perhaps isn't very good at English, they won't reply to that person, because they haven't been very polite. (Alice)

Alternatively, trying to select the most 'needy' recipient raises its own concerns. Some participants were reluctant to make such a decision, especially based solely on a short email message. Even if a worthy recipient can be 'correctly' identified, there is a danger of inadvertently (re)creating a questionable, even paternalistic power relation between those with surplus things and those that need them: would-be recipients may feel compelled to make themselves vulnerable, offering their personal lives up to an unseen arbiter to be judged.

It would seem, in summary, that despite the formal absence of money – and the benefits this brings to those with limited economic or social capital – enacting free online reuse can also, simultaneously, contribute to reproducing existing inequalities and social relations. It is problematic to think in terms of 'pure', binary categories of mainstream and alternative, without recognising the

diversity within and overlaps between each set of practices, as I will now explore further.

6.6 Variations and connections

So far I have considered the three practices – free online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping – as though they were coherent and isolated entities. I began with a simple model, assuming each practice to be reducible to a relatively stable set of constituent elements (materials, competences and meanings) mobilised and integrated each time that practice is enacted. Here I add further complexity to the model by considering, first, the many variations in these performances and, second, the numerous ways that each practice intersects or overlaps with a series of other practices. However, I touch on these issues only briefly here. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 can be read as detailed explorations in the diversity of reclamation practices and their connections with other practices, albeit told from the perspectives of practitioners.

Variations in practice

In Sections 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4, as a proxy for being able to directly apprehend practices-as-entities, I described an idealised, abstract version of each practice. However, as Warde (2005a; 2013) makes clear, practices are marked by significant variation in performances. Crucially, for practice theorists, these variations in performance contain the seeds of innovation and social change.

First, people perform each of the three practices differently according to the types of objects acquired and disposed of, and especially how they are categorised and valued. Returning to how goods are allocated in online reuse, for example, participants appeared to use different criteria depending on their attachment to the item in question. When giving away items with sentimental value, they were more likely to invest time and effort into selecting the most appropriate recipient. Faye, for example, had a flute to give away and took care to direct it to someone she felt would cherish it as she had done, rather than to somebody who might try to sell it for a profit. On other occasions, less treasured items were given away without the same degree of consideration, especially

when they were considered 'junk' or a nuisance. I return to this issue in more detail in Chapter 8.

Second, as observed in Section 6.4, skipping is represented in self-published zines as an oppositional, anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist practice, challenging conventional relationships to money, work and the law. Research participants varied in the extent to which they saw skipping as political, but many were uncomfortable with the confrontational or questionably legal aspects of the practice. Some, for example, were willing to access bins on relatively open land, but preferred not to trespass on or cause damage to private property.

And third, one of the guiding principles in the *Abundance Handbook* is a commitment to gifting: the fruit collected should be given away for free. However, as the *Handbook* also alludes, the question of how strictly this should be applied to produce derived from that fruit is a matter of debate. Participants in the research had interpreted these guidelines differently. Some had explored ways of raising money through selling produce derived from fruit collected, for example making chutney and selling it at local fairs, while others had resolved to only sell at cost, covering the outlay of buying in other ingredients. Others still had taken a stricter line and continued to only give produce away for free.

In addition to varying internally, practices do not exist in isolation from one another and in their rubbing together they exert a mutual influence. Here I consider three ways in which practices can be conceptualised as related to each other: different practices being performed by the same people; practices sharing the same, similar or related elements; and performances being simultaneously examples of more than one practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002).

Practices connected by people

Practices are related to each other by the people that perform them: any given person, over a given period of their lives, will engage in many different activities. Through a practice lens this somewhat unremarkable statement is given greater significance in terms of its contribution to understanding how particular practices emerge and evolve.

The participants in my research were, much like everyone else, the meeting points of multiple practices (Reckwitz, 2002). While no attempt was made to exhaustively catalogue the varied activities of each participant, I did ask about their involvement in a selection of other consumption practices and forms of political engagement, reflecting the preoccupations of the study.

Beyond the simple point that people are engaged in a range of different activities, and furthermore that certain types of activities seem to coincide more commonly than others, interview evidence also highlights the significance, for participants, of their involvement in multiple (consumption and other) practices. Particularly revealing are accounts of (1) how participants choose between different ways of acquiring and disposing of goods in different circumstances, and (2) how their engagement in a variety of different practices has been influential in their biographies, especially in how they came to be involved in online reuse, fruit harvesting and skipping. These two areas are discussed in greater depth in Chapters 8 and 9 respectively, which themselves focus more closely on participants' encounters with reclamation practices. However, it is worth briefly reflecting on two illustrative examples.

First, many participants described their use of a number of different channels or 'conduits' for acquisition and disposal (Gregson et al., 2007b; Evans, 2012b). Gabriella, for instance, talked about a loosely hierarchical relationship between these conduits. She saw online reuse networks as a first port of call when looking for specific things she wanted, before going elsewhere (e.g. second hand shops) to buy them. Similarly, when getting rid of an item that she no longer wanted but regarded as still having financial value, she might try to sell it via eBay to recoup some of the cost of purchase. Other items – no longer seen as having resale value, or those she had acquired for free – would be given away through Freecycle or Freegle. The extent and nature of her use of free online reuse mechanisms, it would seem, was shaped by her use of other channels.

Second, in discussing how they came to be engaged in reuse, fruit harvesting or skipping, interview participants described the impact of a range of other practices experienced along the way. Pat, who helped to set up her local

Freecycle group, attributed this involvement to the close fit between reuse and her existing 'environmental interests', themselves developed through participation in a chain of different environmental action projects at a local level. She began by clearing litter on her own, which came about 'almost by accident' and as a way of keeping fit. This introduced her to involvement in more formal 'green' activities, which in turn exposed her to ecological literature and called into question aspects of her own lifestyle including around consumption.

While the following chapters delve more into participants' life stories, the present chapter is primarily concerned with the lives of practices. The two are, of course, closely related. Online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping have all become the practices they are in the context of the other activities that their practitioners engage in. The backgrounds of key Freecycle and Freegle organisers in environmental action and voluntary sector work have helped shape the codified rules and meanings of online reuse. However, the fact that all participants in online reuse also acquire and dispose of goods in other ways – often those involving monetary value more explicitly – continues to impact on the way people 'do' reuse, including the types of material objects that are exchanged and the differential extent to which they are valued. The establishment of Sheffield Abundance as a particular kind of fruit harvesting project was reliant on competences developed through its founders' previous and ongoing involvement in growing and foraging food, and in art. Elsewhere, different localised versions of urban fruit harvesting, while remaining similar, reflect the relative strength of their connections with different activities, for example those concerning food, environmental sustainability or community development. And skipping is a subtly different practice for those financially reliant on free food, those who routinely reclaim discarded food as part of a (near) total boycott of profit-oriented retail practices, and those for whom skipping sits alongside a number of other, more conventional ways of acquiring food.

Practices connected by shared or related elements

What these latter examples begin to demonstrate is that practices are not only connected to each other by the people performing them, but also by the elements – materials, meanings and competences – that compose them.

As shown earlier in the chapter, free online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping are united by meanings associated with waste, the harm it causes, the need to protect the physical environment and conserve the planet's resources. These meanings further connect each of the three practices to a multitude of other practices as diverse as household recycling, green political activism, construction and automobile design. As 'alternative' consumption practices, they also share a mutual symbolic *disidentification* from the formal monetary economy, manifest variously in ideas about gifting, reciprocity and community, and in rules or procedures around giving and/or taking without money changing hands. Again, they are thus connected with practices ranging from shoplifting to time banking.

The notion of disidentification draws attention to another way that elements connect practices: when the elements of different practices are defined by their complementarity or otherness. Crucially, if one practice/element changes then it is likely that its complementary practices/elements will also change in response. Freecycle, for instance, was originally established to fill a gap in existing second hand exchange mechanisms, in terms of the types of objects that could be given and received (e.g. charity shops historically not stocking furniture or electrical goods). As shown in Gabriella's example above, the nature of online reuse has been shaped and continues to be shaped by the boundaries of other ways of giving and receiving. Skipping relies on what its practitioners see as the wastefulness of mainstream retail practices, that is, on significant quantities of still usable food being discarded. Changes in rules around use-by dates, in the cultural desirability of foods with or without particular aesthetic traits, or infrastructural improvements allowing more routine diversion of surplus food from the waste stream would each impact on the type and quantity of edible material to be found in supermarket bins.

Skipping is an interesting case in terms of the material and symbolic connections between disposal and reuse practices. Skipping and supermarket disposal are intimately connected by a shared material: the food that skippers eat is precisely the same matter that supermarkets throw away, and is often indistinguishable from that on sale on the supermarket shelves. However, meaningfully the food becomes something different when it is thrown away.

Practices that share performances

A third way that practices coincide is in actions that are simultaneously performances of more than one practice. This can be illustrated by returning once again to variations in how goods are allocated via online reuse networks. Getting rid of an item carrying little emotional attachment was often framed as a more convenient alternative to (demonstrating considerable overlap of meaning with) driving junk to the tip. It would seem reasonable, then, to consider this way of using online reuse as a performance *simultaneously* of online reuse and of another practice called 'waste disposal'. By contrast, 'care-fully' choosing the recipient of a much treasured possession, still holding sentimental value, shares meanings with giving hand-me-downs to family and friends; Freecycle/Freegle merely extends the network of potential people to give to. Performances within this subset of online reuse could also be seen as performances of, say, 'donating' practices.

6.7 How reclamation practices spread

I now move on to consider how the three reclamation practices have spread from place to place. I first consider how practices and their elements initially relocate from one spatial setting to another, before then looking at how they take root in new settings, depending on the presence of other practices and elements.

Claiming new territory

First, how do emerging practices arise in new locations? Unlike other web-based exchange mechanisms such as eBay – which are relatively centralised – Freecycle and Freegle both operate franchise-type models where groups are 'owned' and run locally, but approved by and affiliated to the parent

organisation. Individual members interact with, and give and receive amongst, their respective group(s), rather than nationally or internationally. The spatial spread of free online reuse exchange as a practice is therefore closely related to the spread of local groups. In the first instance this means the establishment in a given location of a mechanism to facilitate exchange, which itself comprises codified competences, material infrastructures and technologies, as well as a small team of volunteers (owners and moderators) to administer it.

Prospective new group owners are encouraged to check if there is an existing group in their local area, before requesting approval to start a new one. As one interview participant who had been through the process explained, this included consultation with owners/moderators in neighbouring localities: 'they won't let you start unless the one next door to you, as it were, approves, because effectively you're encroaching on their area' (Pat).

The early years of Freecycle were marked by rapid expansion. The first two UK groups (Sheffield and London) were formed in autumn 2003, a year later there were more than 20 and by the end of 2005 there were 186 groups across the UK.[20] In September 2009, 190 out of 510 groups moved over to the newly formed UK-based organisation, Freegle (Lewis, 2009). Freecycle groups have subsequently been re-established in many of these localities, existing alongside Freegle groups. There are now very few places in the UK without a mechanism facilitating free online reuse exchange.

Urban fruit harvesting projects also operate at a local scale but are more loosely associated with each other than are online reuse groups. Individual involvement is not based on formal membership, as with online reuse, but nonetheless entails participation under the banner of a recognisable group or initiative. While there are significant overlaps with wild foraging, a key distinction is that urban fruit harvesting, of the kind studied here, predominantly takes place in private domestic gardens. Participation in an established project is an important part of gaining access to those spaces. As one local coordinator reflected, 'I couldn't knock on somebody's door as an individual, so the group gives us legitimacy

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[20] Source: archived versions of the Freecycle.org homepage, accessed via the Internet Archive (http://archive.org/web/)

and ... people will respond' (Andrew). Similarly, Marie and Craig emphasised the ongoing relationships between their fruit harvesting initiatives and the organisations receiving much of the produce they collect. In sum, the spread of urban fruit harvesting – as with online reuse – is to a large extent coextensive with the spread of groups to facilitate it in particular localities: understanding the latter is important to understanding the former.

Whereas the franchise model of Freecycle and Freegle has created groups unified by a common exchange mechanism and with shared sets of rules and underlying purposes, fruit harvesting initiatives operate autonomously, with only loose inter-group affiliation. That said, the practice of fruit harvesting is strikingly similar in different locations. Interviews with local coordinators gave some insight into how new groups took shape. They first came to think about starting a project in different ways. Jim recalled an initial conversation with his fellow project co-founder, who 'had been really annoyed that there was so many fruit trees that went unpicked, and so that's when we came up with the idea'. Andrew already went blackberry picking on a casual basis, but saw himself as 'no expert' on foraging. It was when the regular sites he harvested 'were all cut down, so I had no blackberries to pick that summer' that he 'looked around a bit more' and noticed other sources of fruit going unused, including many trees in private gardens. Trish's local initiative 'grew out of' Transition Town activities in the area, including a scheme creating community gardens on disused land. Others were more directly influenced by existing fruit harvesting groups elsewhere in the country. Karen, for instance, was clear that the idea for starting a group in her neighbourhood 'came from the Abundance Sheffield project. Somebody else – the guy at the council – had seen or had known about this Abundance Sheffield project and sort of directed me towards it'.

Some groups, then, had originated relatively independently – their founder noticing the abundance of available fruit and seeing potential uses for it – while others became aware of successful projects elsewhere and were inspired to establish their own local chapter. Beyond the initial idea, though, many noted the strong influence of established groups in determining the form taken by their own initiative. Andrew, for example, was initially unaware of urban fruit

harvesting groups in other cities, but quickly sought them out, keen to learn from their experiences before getting started:

> For ten years I was an information and advice officer, so I'm very used to not reinventing the wheel, but finding out how things are done. So I very quickly Googled and found the brilliant Sheffield guide to setting up and running a fruit harvesting group, so I knew about them. And then over time found other groups. (Andrew)

Interestingly, there was relatively little interpersonal contact involved in transmitting established ways of operating between established and nascent groups:

> We've looked very much at the model, … how they've gone about doing what they do, and we've adopted some of their practices. But we've not had a great deal of contact with one another. (Craig)

Instead their accumulated competences and procedures were communicated from place to place largely in codified form, through written information on websites and especially in the guise of the *Abundance Handbook*, the 'brilliant Sheffield guide' mentioned by Andrew above, effectively a blueprint for establishing the practice of fruit harvesting in new locations:

> So that's where we came from. We've based our thoughts and ideas really on what we read in their handbook. (Karen)

As well as these abstracted competences, the meanings and images of urban fruit harvesting also migrated, encapsulated in a name or brand, again with limited personal interaction:

> It seems to be more like an idea that catches on, and people can develop it in a way that suits their city, their urban area. That's exactly what we've done. … The sentiment is there in a lot of people, in a lot of places round the UK, but having something to latch onto, even just a name, is enough just for people to come together and say well I'm part of this. Just to label it and say well this is what this is. (Craig)

In contrast to online reuse and urban fruit harvesting, skipping is not directly linked to membership of, or participation in, an organisation or project. As such it is more difficult both to measure the extent of its spread as a practice and to identify key informants (analogous to group owners or project coordinators) with

the vantage point to narrate how it has travelled from place to place. In Section 6.4, when defining skipping, I drew on a number of written sources – comparable to the *Freecycle FAQ*, *Freegle Wiki* or the *Abundance Handbook* – that codify its meanings and competences. There are clear continuities (and some differences) between this portrayal of skipping and that described by participants in the present research. However, none of them cited these sources as influential in their becoming skippers or in shaping their performances of skipping. Much more important was the role of interpersonal relationships in passing on, especially through practical demonstration, the procedures of skipping from one person to the next. I return to this in more detail in Chapter 9.

Taking root

As Shove et al. (2012) suggest, individual elements are more transportable from place to place than are fully integrated practices. Their successful integration as practices in a new location depends on the co-existence of other requisite elements. Alternatively, their integration with different elements, present in the new location, can bring about significant variations of the original practice, or the establishment of a new practice altogether (the distinction between which is a moot point, as discussed in Chapter 4).

The emergence of reclamation practices in new places is, as already discussed, partly dependent on successfully importing ways of operating, mechanisms for exchange, an image or name around which people can mobilise, and so on, into the new location. In the cases of online reuse and urban fruit harvesting this meant establishing local groups or projects to facilitate exchange between those with a surplus and others who can make use of it. However, in order for these practices to take root, certain other conditions also need to be met. This might mean the presence of particular elements: a critical mass of unwanted things to be distributed; sufficient penetration of ideas relating to sustainability and waste reduction (but not to the extent that no surplus is available!); acceptance of the 'goodness' or value of reclaimed things, as something acceptable to consume. It could alternatively/simultaneously imply an absence, such as a lack of existing viable conduits for acquiring or disposing of particular types of goods, or the competences and cultural resources required to, say, prepare and enjoy certain

foods, or repair and repurpose things that are 'past their best'. Finally, it might relate to the prevalence or otherwise of other practices and the competing demands that they place on would-be practitioners' time and resources.

Interview participants gave their own reflections on geographical discrepancies in the establishment of reclamation practices. Differences between urban and rural contexts were most prominent. A common view was that fruit harvesting, of the organised kind covered by the research, would not make sense in a rural setting since gluts of produce were already likely to be redistributed by more informal means. Carole, for instance, contrasted the experiences of a family member, living in a village, with the comparative anonymity of the city:

> My mother-in-law does it. She lives in a wee village … and she's got apple trees and pear trees, so if she gets gluts she just puts it in a bucket at the front door and people can just go and help themselves, you know, but that's a sort of a village thing. … I think in cities people just aren't as close and just wouldn't think of doing it. (Carole)

Similarly, Trish was able to compare her rural upbringing with her more urban adult life:

> I was brought up in a village and you wouldn't get food being wasted, you know, we had apple trees and we used the fruit. Why wouldn't you? … I'd say it was more family based. Because, you know, again in a village you tend to have extended family, so you would take it to other family members who were just down the road a bit. (Trish)

Conversely, organised fruit harvesting has taken off in urban areas due to the greater likelihood of fruit going unused, itself a function of numerous intersecting work and provisioning practices. Several participants pointed to a lack of knowledge and know-how in relation to food and its production, reflecting spatial and social distance from its origins:

> If you're living in an urban area I think it's a very different approach to food … and the more urbanised you are, the more divorced you are from where your food and everything comes from. So when you suddenly rent a flat and it's got a tree in [its garden], you may not even notice that. … So I think it's just a progression of the more urbanised we become, then the more you rely on other avenues to acquire your food or your whatever. You have a shop mentality basically. (Margaret)

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Members of online reuse groups also noted differences between rural and urban experiences, although these related more to the varying nature of the practice that has emerged, rather than its ability or otherwise to establish a foothold. David was involved in running a reuse group in a village just outside a major city and so was able to compare the two. On the one hand, in his more rural setting, the quality of connective experience was seen as preferable, with the smaller number of members more likely to get to know each other and maintain contact beyond the transaction. A further advantage of this reduced anonymity, for David, was in helping to police conduct, reducing the number of 'no shows', the near-universal bugbear of online reuse participants throughout my research:

> People have their frustrations about people not showing up. … We don't get that because they might know you, and they don't want to be the one who doesn't show up. (David)

On the other hand, the scale of a city-wide group was, he felt, more likely to offer the range of things and people to successfully match up availability of, and need for, particular goods. Similarly, Amy compared her experience in a large reuse group to that of her relatives living in a small town with a 'much smaller [reuse] network': 'they really struggle because there's not very many people giving'. Sandra, however, suggested there was an optimum size of group, above which the exchange system ceases to function well. Likewise, Anita felt that her city-based group had grown too big, making it often prohibitively difficult to acquire things due to the increased competition. In her view it 'needs to be village-ised', with city-wide groups of a certain size split into smaller, more localised patches.

6.8 Conclusions

I began this chapter by identifying the key distinctive elements of three reclamation practices, relative to other ways of acquiring and disposing of goods. Free online reuse is marked by its use of Internet-based technologies to connect people and by giving and receiving things without money or other goods being exchanged in return. The spatial settings of urban fruit harvesting (mostly domestic gardens) and skipping (round the back of supermarkets) both

differ from prevailing food shopping experiences, as do the tools and skills required to acquire food in these settings. Relevant practical skills relate especially to accessing produce and using the senses to discern its quality, two concerns often taken for granted in conventional retail spaces. Unsurprisingly, all three practices share a preoccupation with waste and prolonging the useful lives of things. All disidentify, in different ways, from monetary exchange.

The initial analysis presented a stable and coherent view of practices as routinised patterns of activity with shared defining components. Lived experiences of practices can, however, differ from how they are represented in the abstract. In free online reuse, for example, removing money from exchange had intended and unintended consequences. It successfully allowed people access to goods they could not otherwise afford and helped recirculate goods lacking in financial value but still considered useful. However, it also created a dilemma: how should goods be allocated if not according to ability to pay? Selecting recipients on a first come, first served basis might privilege those with constant access to online communication means or transport; giving to the most polite or articulate person might favour those rich in particular forms of cultural capital.

I then added further complexity by considering the degree of variation in performances and by demonstrating how practices connect to each other: through their shared practitioners, through sharing the same or related elements, and through shared performances. In the process I drew attention, again, to the problematic nature of 'pure' categories such as 'alternative' or 'mainstream' economic practices, highlighting significant overlap and mutual influence.

Finally, I investigated how reclamation practices move from place to place. Focusing on urban fruit harvesting, I highlighted the role of the *Abundance Handbook* – as a codified set of competences and meanings – in enabling the migration of particular ways of operating to new locations. Whether or not practices take root in a new place, however, depends on the presence of other elements and practices.

So far, in concentrating on the lives of reclamation practices I have only presented a glimpse of participants' engagement with those practices. In the following three chapters I shift focus to these experiences beginning by considering how people make sense of their involvement.

Chapter seven: making sense of reclamation

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I shift focus from the emergence and development of social practices to the lives of their practitioners. In particular I ask why people engage in reclamation practices: I am concerned with understanding how, in their own terms, research participants make sense of this engagement.

Although I use the commonplace language of 'motivations', 'reasons' and 'rationales', I make no assumption that these phenomena (necessarily) correspond to cognitive processes that precede and/or cause behaviour. Reflecting my practice-oriented approach I interpret them less as the properties of individuals and more as socially-constituted narratives or discourses, mobilised, reproduced and potentially repurposed by participants in the process of reflecting on and talking about why they do what they do. The discussions comprising our interview conversations can be seen as enactments of these stories, or ways of talking, but also simultaneously as performances – part of the set of doings *and sayings* – of the practices discussed.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, there is a need to move beyond single, primary motivations in considering why people engage in online reuse, fruit harvesting and skipping. Attention is given, therefore, to the multiple, overlapping and at times contradictory narratives that participants negotiate. I begin, in Section 7.2, with consideration of participants' immediate motivations for engaging in reclamation practices. I then move on, in Section 7.3, to explore what they felt was the underlying significance of their engagement: the stories behind the immediate motivations, including what they hoped to achieve, if anything, through their actions or why it was important to them.[21]

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[21] The distinction I make between 'immediate motivations' and 'underlying significance' is simply a way of organising the presentation of findings and not a substantive comment on the hierarchy of different decision-making mechanisms.

7.2 Immediate motivations

The most prominent sets of narratives relating to why participants engaged in reclamation practices can be grouped under five headings: cost-effectiveness and convenience; reducing waste; connecting people; challenging/avoiding prevailing market practices; and fun, excitement and conviviality. As will become clear, each of these overarching headings covers a diversity of subtly different engagements. Crucially, participants moved back and forth between these narratives in articulating their motivations: they explained their involvement in multiple interrelated ways.

Cost-effectiveness and convenience

For many participants, using alternative channels to acquire goods was at least partly about saving money by getting things for free. Some emphasised this as their primary motivation; Vicky and Beverly for instance both related their regular use of free online reuse networks to being on low income and their ability, or otherwise, to afford things:

> I would say first and foremost it is about getting stuff for free. Definitely. It is about getting stuff for free. Erm, I'm a single mum on benefits; money is really tight. (Vicky)

> And as for receiving stuff, well it's financial cos we're on a pension, so we can't always afford to buy things. It's mainly that really. (Beverly)

In these cases receiving goods for free was the difference between being able to acquire something and going without. As Gemma explained, 'it's helping me to get whatever it is that I want without having to go out and buy it, which a lot of times I can't afford'. Conversely, some participants explained their infrequent acquisition through reuse networks by reference to their own lack of need, either not needing to acquire things or having sufficient financial resources to comfortably buy them elsewhere. Although she had given away numerous items through Freecycle, Kirsty was reluctant to post requests for goods, given her relative financial security:

> Maybe, I don't know, I don't want to look as if I'm grasping for something. I'm not doing this primarily because I've got a shortage of money. And I sort of feel, well, maybe it's just a bit greedy actually

just to be saying 'I need an X; is anybody gonna give me one for free?' It seems slightly not right. (Kirsty)

Others fell between these two positions. They recognised the opportunity to save money as beneficial and a key motivating factor, whether in the context of a limited budget like Tom, freeing up resources for other things, or due to the satisfaction associated with getting something for nothing, of finding a bargain, like Pat, and often a combination of the two:

> I think my motivation for getting stuff off Freecycle is some things you just need in life and if you can get them for free that's brilliant. (Tom)

> It's funny cos I'm not motivated by that kind of thing, but I think I am. Everybody likes the idea of getting free things. (Pat)

Similar themes emerged with respect to skipping. Those taking part in the research rarely saw themselves as financially reliant on food salvaged from bins, but appreciated the cost saving. Paul described getting free food as 'useful, but it's not out of need', despite skipping accounting for an estimated 90 per cent of his regular food intake. He contrasted his experiences with others he had met, including homeless people, for whom the bins were a 'main food resource'. However, some participants made more direct connections between their own skipping and periods of relative material hardship:

> I used to do it more often when I was unemployed, to be fair, because not only the time that you have to spend freely going around bins, but I dunno, the economic side of it which is obviously helpful. (Gabriella)

> There was times when I realised when I'm going to the bins to get food I'm like … I wouldn't be able to afford to live if I wasn't doing this. And that was quite scary, because most of the time it had just been like a beneficial thing; it just saves a bit of money. Whereas when you've got no money it doesn't save a bit of money, it just means that you're eating tonight and that was quite a shock when I realised that. Cos I never really thought that I'd be in that situation, where I actually needed to go and steal food from the bin to eat. (Stu)

These two stories draw attention to the importance of changing circumstances, not only impacting on participants' level or frequency of involvement in a given practice but also their meaningful engagement with it. There was a significant distinction for Stu – marked by a strong emotional reaction: shock and fear –

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between skipping to 'save a bit of money' and doing it to 'be able to afford to live'.

More generally, participants situated their engagement in alternative consumption practices within the contexts of their life stories, helping to make more sense of why it was particularly important to be able to save money through free acquisition at particular times, especially during periods of reduced income or increased expenditure. Two recurring examples were when moving house or having children (see also Gregson et al., 2007a; 2007b). Tom had previously been aware of online reuse networks but only started to use them 'when we were about to buy our house and then we were really low on money'. Similarly, Naomi began to use Freecycle when moving to a bigger home: 'we went from flat to house, that's why we were trying to acquire things. We didn't really have the money to fill the house'. Meanwhile, despite working in a professional role, Anita described her use of reuse networks (alongside other sources of second hand goods) as a 'necessity', invaluable for getting clothes, toys and other equipment for her children, as well as for passing them on again afterwards. While she acknowledged being 'the type of people who would recycle anyway', saving money on these essentials was particularly important in the context of having to commit a considerable proportion of the household earnings for childcare:

> It's also cos, you know, you haven't got any money. I work for the government, I'm an economist. My income is wiped out by my childcare. I earn zero. I just go to work to keep my job. So people with a young family have the worst– it's the most drain on your income. (Anita)

By contrast, while saving money was in numerous cases central to accounts of skipping and reuse exchange, it was rarely given as a reason for engaging in urban fruit harvesting. Some celebrated the 'idea' of getting fruit for free, the satisfaction of making use of what was freely available rather than needlessly spending money or working the land. Volunteers enjoyed picking and eating fruit for its flavour, freshness, variety and so on, but this was not typically portrayed as a substitute for spending money on food.

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A second major theme – that reclamation practices provided not only a source of free stuff but a convenient means of disposal – was more directly relevant to experiences of fruit harvesting. Coordinators of local harvesting groups were asked to reflect on why, in their experience, fruit tree owners were willing to give sometimes vast quantities of their produce away for free. In many cases they were, as Craig put it, 'overwhelmed' by the amount of fruit that they found growing in their gardens and were grateful for 'somebody to come and deal with the problem'. One important factor was having insufficient time to pick and distribute the fruit, especially in the context of busy working lives. Karen identified a certain irony in this:

> People go to supermarkets, spend an absolute fortune on fruit and veg, which means they have to go out and earn more money to then fund that, which means they've got less time to pick the stuff that's growing for nothing in their gardens. (Karen)

Trish, as both a tree owner and volunteer was able to reflect on her own experiences, highlighting the time involved and effort exerted in harvesting fruit:

> I was shocked by how year after year I would waste that fruit and that's because it all comes at once, and it's not in the kitchen, it's on the tree ... and, you know, in some cases quite high on the tree, so you do actually have to organise yourself to say 'okay I'm gonna get a ladder; I'm gonna have receptacles; I'm gonna test them for ripeness' ... And you just don't do it, you know. If you buy it with the rest of your shopping it comes from the car, into the kitchen. (Trish)

The hard work of dealing with a glut of fruit might be especially problematic for older people or those with physical mobility issues, another reason to call in outside help:

> A lot of people who ... offer us their fruit, are older and not physically able to (a) eat or distribute all the fruit, and (b) just to pick it. So we find it a lot, the people who have large gardens with old fruit trees tend to be sort of older and happy to have people come into their garden, as long as they know that their produce is going to a good cause. (Craig)

Convenience was also a core motivation for people using online reuse networks to get rid of unwanted things (Aptekar, 2016). In the majority of cases, through both Freecycle and Freegle, the recipient takes responsibility for arranging

collection from the giver. For many participants who might otherwise donate to charity shops, or else simply dispose of goods at a local amenity site, not having to leave home or transport awkward items was seen as a major practical advantage:

> You could also add to the reasons of being on the network [that] it's really convenient. People come and pick up your trash, from your front door, and you don't have to take it to the tip. (Susan)

This was of particular importance to those without easy access to transportation. For Kirsty and Amy this meant no longer having to make arrangements to borrow a car or ask for a lift. Sandra and her husband were both unable to drive, historically a source of frustration and embarrassment, alongside practical difficulties in trying to dispose of things.

Again, life circumstances (such as having children) or periods of transition (such as moving house) made the convenience of giving away via reuse networks especially compelling. Vicky, for example, described how, as a parent of young children, it could be difficult to find opportunities to deliver unwanted goods to a charity shop. Kirsty was one of several participants who used reuse networks intensively while in the process of moving house, subsequently finding she had less need to do so:

> The reason there was a lot of stuff is because we moved house, so there were things that we had in our old house that we had to get rid of, and there were also things in the new house which the previous owners had left behind which we didn't need. So I think probably I'm not using it so much now but there was a period where we just seemed to be constantly advertising things. (Kirsty)

And for Olivia, at a highly transient stage in her life as an international student, the ability first to furnish a home with little outlay and then subsequently to clear a home quickly and easily made perfect practical sense:

> My plans is I'll be moving here for four, five years but then I don't plan on staying. Probably coming back in the future but I don't know. So if I'm moving in and out and I'm just carrying everything on my back, it's not very convenient. So it's easier if I just go somewhere and I'm able to, for example, furnish a house, with the basics from Freegle or Freecycle or something similar. And then when I go I'll put it back, so

I don't have to carry things around with me. It's very convenient from that point of view. (Olivia)

Reducing waste

Across the three reclamation practices, the most consistently cited set of rationales for engagement related to waste. More specifically, waste was understood to be problematic and something to be avoided or minimised. Nearly all participants made reference to waste-related issues at least as part of their motivation, ranging from those with strong moral objections like Pat ('I really do hate waste') to those like Gemma who saw the opportunity to extend the lives of still-usable objects as a positive by-product of a choice they would have made anyway for other, more instrumental reasons.

This is perhaps unsurprising given the nature of the practices discussed, each of which involves diverting goods from conventional waste disposal streams in one way or another. By using these alternative channels to acquire or dispose of things, participants felt able to reduce the amount of waste they were personally responsible for.

Underlying this apparently straightforward, near universal rationale of 'reducing waste' were several distinct narratives. First, some participants discussed waste in terms of global environmental concerns. Here wasting stuff was equated to consuming too much stuff, creating greater demand for goods to be manufactured and transported, and in turn contributing both to the using up of scarce resources (especially oil) and to climate change via carbon dioxide emissions. Reducing waste, in this first sense, meant reducing consumption and hence reducing the impact of consumption on the planet.

> Basically there's too much stuff and we waste an awful lot of the world's resources buying new stuff. (Kirsty)

> It's a resource issue. It's an energy issue. I have an aversion to waste I suppose. A lot of material resource and energy and effort is put into manufacturing. (Simon)

Second, waste was identified with more localised environmental concerns. In this context waste was understood as a category of troublesome matter: stuff that is no longer wanted and needs to be hidden, relocated or destroyed. The

more waste is produced, the more needs to be dealt with in these ways; reducing waste means alleviating this burden. Typically this type of concern was expressed as a desire to 'keep things out of landfill', with 'landfill' standing as a catch-all descriptor for unsustainable refuse management practices. When elaborated upon, a series of further underlying narratives emerged, relating both to what happens to the materials involved; and to the protection of green spaces, the scarcity of land available for landfill and a fear of this running out.

> But like anything plastic, like all children's toys are plastic now, it would be unbearable if you didn't give it away, cos you know it's gonna be here for the next million years. (Anita)

> Nowadays there's also the pressing problem of landfill and the fact that the space is running out for landfill. All the landfill sites are getting full and we haven't got much more available. (Sandra)

Ultimately, for Vicky, waste understood as troublesome matter raised ethical questions not only as to where our objects of consumption come from and the impacts of producing and distributing them, but where they go when we are finished with them:

> I am aware of landfill and that it's not this magical place where stuff just goes, and that all the landfills are filling up. You know, the largest landfill site in the world, in New York, can be seen from space, which is just ridiculous, you know. And people just don't make that connection. Where is it going? (Vicky)

These first two ways of conceptualising the problem of waste share a common emphasis on harmful consequences of wasteful consumption practices. They also share a tendency to quantify these impacts: what makes waste bad is that, all other things being equal, more scarce resources are being used, more carbon dioxide is emitted, more rubbish needs to be dealt with, and so on.

Third, alongside these associations with harmful consequences, many participants felt an aversion to waste that was not always so tangible or articulable, a conviction that it is simply wrong to act wastefully. Andrew felt 'annoyance' at seeing fruit lying unused on the ground, while Trish said she was 'upset' by a similar sight. For Sally not being wasteful, and making the best use

of resources, was a deeply ingrained disposition acquired through her upbringing and explicitly not about environmental consequences:

> I would say to you that I'm not a green person ... I would say that I have no idea about my carbon footprint because I haven't and I don't care, but I am not a wasteful person. I was brought up to not waste, to reuse if you could. (Sally)

Similarly, Alice talked about inheriting 'thriftiness' from her parents and especially her grandparents who had lived 'very difficult lives', particularly in wartime. This experience had helped her grandmother become 'really good at thinking of things to do with things', repurposing objects to, again, make best use of what was available, an orientation and set of skills which Alice felt had been passed on to her. While thrift bears resemblance to more immediate concerns with saving money, what makes it distinctive in these instances is being to some extent removed from *particular* material circumstances, becoming a principle or habit of thought in its own right, a *generalised* concern with prudent use of resources.

More broadly, waste in this third sense stood for the unrealised potential in things, an aversion to seeing still-usable items going unused, a 'wasted opportunity' in the words of Craig, an urban fruit harvester:

> Something's there for you to pick, literally, and letting it pass by just seems like a travesty to me, so I want to make the most of what's around me. (Craig)

And in relation to the contents of supermarket bins:

> It seems wrong to me that that food should not be used to feed people ... so until that resource is depleted, I'd like to encourage as many people as possible to use that resource. (Paul)

Some participants expressed this unrealised potential as a matter of latent value yet to be extracted and enjoyed. For Tom it made sense to make the most of the time and energy already invested in producing goods, rather than see this effort go to waste:

> So it feels like if there's tons of apples growing all over the city and cherries and plums, then it makes a lot of sense to gather those in,

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rather than spending your time trying to grow a little apple tree in your back garden, and you might only get 20 apples off a year, and your next door neighbour might already have a thousand. (Tom)

In other cases, participants felt a strong emotional attachment to items they had decided to give away. The thought of throwing them out, of their lives as useful objects coming to an end, provoked a sense of loss:

I think that all the kind of things that we've had throughout our lives have in a way become part of us. You know, our clothes, when we were kids our toys, our books ... And to see them go into just a rubbish bin is quite hurtful in a way. (Sandra)

Central to the decision to use reuse networks for disposal was the understanding that the object would not come to the end of its life but continue to be used and valued, that it would go to a good home. Vicky described how she gave away a 'really cool' portable record player that she had herself acquired second hand at a car boot sale: 'if it goes, it needs to be used. Do you know what I mean? I want it to be used'.

Part of using mechanisms like Freecycle or Freegle, then, was about finding the right person to give to: someone, usually previously unknown to the giver, who would appreciate, make use of and benefit from the item being given. It was, to move on to a third major set of motivations, about creating connections between people:

It's to do with finding the person that really wants it or really needs it. It's going to the right place … you know that you've specifically targeted the person who needed that item. (Beverly)

Connecting people

As highlighted in Chapter 6, online reuse networks and urban fruit harvesting groups were established with the aim of matching up people who have a surplus of particular resources with other people in need of those resources. As one might expect, the notion of 'connecting people' was a common thread in research participants' accounts of why they engaged in reclamation practices.

Freecycle and Freegle, as online reuse networks, were frequently characterised by their members as technologies to connect people in ways that would not

happen organically via existing interpersonal relationships. Primarily this was understood as a matter of scale or of extended reach, increasing the number of people with whom one can communicate – that is, the pool of potential donors and recipients – and so increasing the likelihood of finding someone willing to give or take a particular type of good. Amy compared this with more informal mechanisms, and their comparatively shorter reach, that had been integral to her experiences of childhood:

> Freecycle just coordinates it, doesn't it? So that, whereas growing up it would be amongst family and friends like, you know, the desk's broken; we need a new desk and mention to my nana and to aunties and they'll mention it to their friends ... It's just, yeah, with the internet, amazing. Like it's perfect use of the internet isn't it? Bringing people together to do that on a massive scale. (Amy)

Similarly, urban harvesting involves taking fruit from people who do not want it or cannot make use of it, typically collecting it from gardens of private homes, and then distributing it to various groups and individuals that will use it. Fruit harvesting groups essentially act as intermediaries between these parties, providing a legitimate, trustworthy means for getting fruit out of the spaces where it is not needed and into spaces where it is:

> A percentage of waste [occurs] in gardens where people have bought a house and it happens to have a couple of fruit trees which they're not either interested in or don't know how to look after it or have the time to do it. And therefore it goes to waste because it isn't common ground; it's private ground. So you have to have a mechanism for being able to sort of access that type of fruit. (Margaret)

While skipping is also underpinned by a concern with securing access to unused resources, it is not directly about connecting the parties involved. Indeed, some participants preferred to go skipping at night to *avoid* contact – and conflict – with those disposing of the goods to be salvaged: supermarket management and staff. Participants did emphasise the role of skipping in the maintenance of existing relationships (cf. Miller, 1998b), as opposed to making new connections with strangers. This happened in two ways. First, skipping was, for some, a sociable experience and a way of spending time with particular

friends. Sophie and Katy, for instance, recalled a recent outing to the nearby bins:

> Sophie: So we all went, met them on our bikes, and we all went together … there were like ten of us or something, eight of us, and we all went together and it was like quite fun … so it was like a sociable thing wasn't it?

> Katy: Yeah, yeah, it was just kind of like hanging out for an evening, but doing– you feel like you're kind of doing something useful as well.

I return to this particular aspect of skipping shortly, in considering enjoyment and conviviality as motivations. Second, interdependent relationships were nurtured through sharing the produce that was retrieved. In Emily's experience, different people in the social circle performed different, complementary roles in sourcing and preparing salvaged food, which would then be consumed together:

> There were always a few people who were happy to do that, you know, they would do the scouting, the food would be brought back; someone else would do the cooking cos they're good at cooking or whatever. (Emily)

Paul routinely made deliveries of skipped food to his friends' homes on the way home from the bins, carefully cleaning and packing up boxes of food, trying where possible to cater to specific people's tastes and preferences. Increasing the range of people he gave to had changed his skipping behaviour, being more likely to 'clear [the] bin out' rather than taking just enough for his own personal consumption.

Returning to the relatively more formal exchange structures of online reuse and urban fruit harvesting, participants offered different views as to why such connecting mechanisms were needed. Some diagnosed issues of concern at a societal level, employing the language of social fragmentation or individualisation (Bauman, 2001a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this context, reuse groups and fruit harvesting projects served as an antidote to problematic features seemingly distinctive to (or heightened in) modern life, such as disconnects between geographically proximate people, increased anonymity and an overemphasis on individual self-reliance:

> Having run a Freegle group, there's a lot of people who … say it's really nice because it gives them somebody to give stuff to, cos they just didn't know anybody really. Erm, and there's a lot of people out there who really don't know their neighbours. (Ruth)

For Paul reuse networks were a response to society lacking an effective 'communication system': not merely people not knowing each other, but them failing to connect with those that they do know, especially when in need. Online reuse provided a substitute for these missing connections. Put more strongly this meant mobilising against a perceived decline of close-knit, interdependent communities in contemporary societies. With respect to fruit harvesting, for example:

> It's to fight against the fact that we don't talk, and the fact that somebody will go and buy at Tescos, will go and get four apples for a pound, when their next door neighbour has got apples dropping on their ground ... The breakdown of community means that we don't communicate and that we feel bad about asking if we can have some of someone else's apples, even though they're going to waste and you can see it. (Tom)

In this formulation, two oft-cited critiques of the 'consumer society', as identified in Chapter 2, are intimately intertwined: we waste so much (partly) because we have become atomised. Meanwhile Ruth, as a member of her local Transition initiative, saw greater local-level interdependence as crucial to developing economies less reliant on fossil fuels in the face of climate change and depletion of oil reserves:

> I believe in what the Transition movement stands for, which is that we need to get more local, you know, we need to build our communities back up to being more resilient to when oil prices shoot up through the roof and things, and that we can support ourselves and people around us. (Ruth)

Other participants, while often sharing similar environmental and/or social concerns, described connecting mechanisms in more morally neutral terms: as first and foremost a practical solution to a practical problem. This was especially the case with online reuse networks:

> I always thought I wish there was a way that I could find the person that needed the thing that I've got, and I discovered that Freecycle

was the way to do that. So that was ... almost a service I'd been looking for. Once I discovered it, it sort of met that need. (Kirsty)

Participants also reflected on the nature of the interpersonal connections made through their engagement in reclamation practices. For the most part, experiences of online reuse were marked by brief and functional interactions with fellow users. Meeting people was a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. That said, some participants revealed their enjoyment of these interactions, however fleeting. Carole relished these 'on the doorstep' encounters and the opportunity to get to know new people, although acknowledged not having 'kept up any friendships' to date. David, as a volunteer with his local group, celebrated how reuse exchange 'promotes interaction' amongst those who would otherwise not have come into contact:

> You know, you will meet people you would never have done if it hadn't been for Freecycle. I think that's important as well. And I don't think you should underestimate those sort of things either, because some people may just do it because they're lonely. (David)

Some participants cultivated sustained relationships following an initial meeting through reuse exchange. Ruth, another volunteer, had observed the development of lasting, mutually interdependent relationships between members of her local group, in some cases eventually removing the need for an online mediating mechanism:

> A lot of the regulars on the group have got to know people who live close to them and after a while they stop using Freegle as much because they've now got a network of people who they give stuff to. (Ruth)

In Vicky's case it was shared circumstances but also repeated (primarily functional) interactions that eventually allowed a stronger bond to develop with one particular individual:

> I mean I've actually made a good friend off Freecycle. It's a local mum and she asked for a push chair, and I had a push chair I no longer needed … And then she was giving away some videos and we ended up swapping a few things … and then our daughters– one day I was round with my daughter and they started playing together and then she invited me in for a cuppa and we got chatting. And by that

point we'd probably swapped about five times but never spoken, just kind of gone to each other's house: 'here you go'; 'there you go' … And we've now become good friends, which is quite interesting, you know. People say 'how did you meet?' and, well, we met on Freecycle, you know. (Vicky)

For Susan, who had moved to a new city and knew very few people locally, making friends had turned out to be an 'unexpected bonus' of her engagement in reuse:

I didn't set out to join a recycle network to make friends; never really occurred to me that it might be a way of meeting people, but it's really quite effective. And so, you know, I know quite a few more people than I would otherwise and I've got some quite good friends from it. (Susan)

Again, new relationships were strengthened in part through repeated contact and a desire to reciprocate:

I've helped out the lady down the road. I've helped her and got things for her and, you know, kind of become quite good friends, and so she had a bathroom cabinet that she didn't want and so I was one of the first people to go 'oh I could really do with that' and because we knew each other and because I'd helped her, she chose me off the list of people. (Susan)

Compared with online reuse, fruit harvesting was much more likely to result in repeated contact with the same people, at least for the duration of a picking season. This was due to the often (sub)local focus, with towns and cities typically separated into smaller harvesting areas, and also to the frequency of picks during the late summer and autumn, interspersed with regular workshops, chutney-making sessions, juicing events and so on. For Tom it was the area-level focus and the opportunity to make and nurture connections with people – specifically people in his immediate neighbourhood – that most strongly drove his involvement in fruit harvesting:

I really want to get to know local people. I want to build relationships locally and build community locally. And so I try, rather than responding to everything that's going on around the city, I just now pretty much limit myself to stuff that's almost on my doorstep really. I think that there's an enriching of relationship and community through

that. So now I will only do– basically just get fruit that is walking distance from my house, and involve local children. (Tom)

For Andrew, while seeing waste reduction as his 'number one' reason for engagement, this was closely followed by a strikingly similar desire to meet people at a very local scale:

It's also the community doing something that brings people together and is local. Particularly when I'm picking fruit really near where I live, in the streets immediately near where I live, I know I've got a bigger motivation than when I go half a mile down the road somewhere, or a mile down the road. So that's part of it, getting to know my area and getting to know people, bringing people together. (Andrew)

Linda again highlighted these twin motivations, in the same order of priority:

We started off as kind of avoiding waste but you end up that you are sort of building communities. (Linda)

And there was some evidence that these efforts to bring local people into contact with one another, and for them to develop relationships, were successful. Stu, active in his local harvesting group for several years, described how much of his friendship group had formed around their shared involvement in picking fruit and other alternative ways of consuming:

And now they're all like, yeah, they're really good friends, really close friends. And a lot of pre-existing friends who I have kept in touch with are now good friends with them as well. (Stu)

Challenging (or avoiding) prevailing market practices

A shared, defining characteristic of free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping is that each operates (ostensibly) 'outside' the formal economy and, more specifically, that money is not (directly) involved in the acquisition of goods. While this feature has already been noted as underpinning participants' motivations, in that they benefited from 'getting stuff for free', it is worth reflecting on a further set of rationales relating more immediately to the 'otherness' of alternative consumption practices, their being different from what is understood to be the mainstream capitalist and/or market model of exchange. These types of sentiments can be divided into two categories: those involving objections to specific unethical business practices or undesirable consequences

of consumption; and those advocating alternatives to the logic of monetary or profit-motivated exchange more broadly.

First, some participants saw consuming outside of the formal economy as a way of avoiding negative impacts associated with conventional chains of manufacture, distribution and retail, relating especially to exploitative labour relations, depletion of scarce resources and ecological degradation. There is, of course, some degree of overlap between these motivations for using alternative channels and those already discussed in reference to waste reduction; examples relating to landfill and to other harmful environmental consequences of wasteful production and consumption are equally applicable here but need not be restated. However, participants' objections to questionable market practices were not exclusively filtered through the lens of waste. Avoiding waste might reduce the overall quantity of consumption, and so reduce the occurrence of problematic consequences, but perhaps not as effectively or extensively as trying to avoid those implicated ways of consuming altogether.

Paul, for instance, explained his engagement in alternative consumption practices in terms of an objection to multinational corporations that are 'money grabbing and not ethical in the way they operate', making him 'reluctant and slow to buy from them'. This did not amount to a total boycott, but meant that he preferred to explore alternative channels, from salvaging discarded food to buying from a local worker cooperative, before resorting to more conventional forms of retail. Similarly, Katy said that she tries to avoid shopping at supermarkets 'just because I don't agree with the way that they operate ... the way they treat their suppliers and the people that work for them'. Faye expressed a desire to avoid 'very complicated relationships with … products', giving the example of 'mobile phones and the ethics of mining'. Here she highlighted not only the using up of resources but also the social impacts of demand for certain materials, including sustaining military conflicts. For Craig, making use of locally growing fruit was a complementary activity to refraining from buying food imported from the other side of the world, at great environmental cost:

I mean if you go into the Tesco across the road and pick up a Braeburn apple, the chances are it's gonna be from New Zealand. You literally couldn't find a further point on the globe, and yet apples like Braeburns will quite happily grow in the park just there. It just seems totally ludicrous and I see … the whole Abundance idea as fitting into a sort of an environmental awakening. People are starting to realise that maybe our methods of production and distribution, which we've had for decades now, aren't sustainable environmentally. (Craig)

There were a number of rationales underlying this avoiding of particular market practices. Some framed it in terms of reducing demand for goods produced and distributed in questionable ways, communicating disapproval to the businesses concerned with the hope that this would result in change. Others felt it was a matter of maintaining personal integrity, ensuring they were not responsible for harm being caused, though not necessarily expecting any wider impact. I return to these different perspectives in Section 7.3, but for now it is worth noting a recurring idea across these rationales, that second hand goods and those diverted from the waste stream were largely free from further ethical consideration, dissociated from their original, complex chains of manufacture and exchange (Clark, 2004; Edwards and Mercer, 2007). This was especially common amongst skippers, being happy to eat types of discarded food that they would not normally buy on social or environmental grounds:

Things that were unethical become ethical because they're in a bin now. I feel like they lose their unethical source once they've been–whatever company was exploiting the land or making money in an unethical way. Once it's gone in a bin it's about rescuing something of the world's resources … that's now about to go into landfill, so it feels like anything that's rescued from a skip is ethical. (Tom)

It's just kind of easier cos you don't think about all these consequences … you know it's not got this whole big backlog of consequences. In a way it kind of frees you from that. (Katy)

Second, as well as seeking to avoid particular harmful business practices, some participants expressed a more general dissatisfaction with what they variously characterised as capitalism, the market, or the monetary economy. At times this was communicated in explicitly oppositional terms: Sophie said she would 'like to opt out of capitalism'; Kirsty felt that 'it'd be nice to undermine capitalism

completely by using Freecycle' but did not think this a realistic proposition. Frequently, though, the sentiment came across more subtly as yearning for, or celebrating, different ways of relating to and exchanging with other people. As Paul neatly summed up: '[It's] not so much that I'm anti-capitalist, so much as I want us to learn how to get on'.

Some emphasised the redistributive potential of non-monetary exchange. Notwithstanding concerns raised in Chapter 6 about the continued reproduction of classed power relations, allocating resources according to criteria other than the ability to pay was considered both personally advantageous and morally good, as it went some small way to addressing disparities in the distribution of financial resources. As already seen, numerous participants described how they had benefited from getting things without having to pay for them, in many cases allowing them access to goods they would not have been able to afford or justify spending on. Many also enjoyed seeing others benefit in this way and being a part of making this happen:

> Well I had a girl on here who asked for something. It was a food processor or something. And I'd got a spare one and she came to fetch it, and I ended up giving her all sorts of stuff, you know, for her flat. She'd just moved into a flat, she was a young girl, she hadn't got anything. So yeah that's nice; it's nice to be able to do that. (Beverly)

Others felt there was something positive in itself about giving and receiving without requiring a direct, equivalent repayment. Some expressed strong commitment to the gift economy model central to how free online reuse networks and fruit harvesting groups tend to be characterised by their organisers. This was contrasted with more immediately balanced forms of exchange involving currency or barter:

> I love the idea of sharing between friends in a community and losing the attachment to money that we have in terms of putting a price tag on things [where] you end up having to buy things off each other in some way, doing kind of equal trades. (Tom)

There were significant overlaps here with some of the more communitarian notions of connecting people introduced above, with an emphasis on mutual interdependence and the maintenance of social ties through reciprocity. Several

participants, like Tom above, drew connections between giving/receiving and sharing. A commonly cited way of using reuse networks was to acquire something to meet a particular need for a particular period, before then giving it away again. Although strictly the ownership of goods passed from one private individual to another, in these cases reuse can be interpreted as a way of drawing, temporally, on collectively held resources. Similarly, while gratitude (and in some cases a sense of indebtedness) might be directed towards an individual group member, this was resolved by a perceived reciprocal obligation to give back to the group more generally. Some made explicit or implicit reference to the principle of 'paying it forward', a form of generalised reciprocity (Sahlins, 2004; Nelson and Rademacher, 2009; Willer et al., 2012) whereby a gift is given without any expectation of something directly in return, but with the knowledge that the giver has already benefited from the gifts of others and the assumption that in the future the recipient might give to someone else.

> Fraser: I'm a firm believer of, you know, that sort of idea where if you do something, especially if it's nothing particularly major, you say 'I don't want anything; just next time somebody else needs your help, just give them a hand or something.'
>
> Susan: It's like pay it forward. And sometimes it gets paid back to you.

Fun, excitement and conviviality

A final set of motivations related to the enjoyment of taking part in its own right, often quite apart from the achievement of more instrumental outcomes through acquiring or disposing of goods. For many participants, fruit harvesting was most importantly a fun activity; as Sally put it, getting the fruit itself was 'kind of secondary'. Various different aspects of the experience were emphasised as enjoyable. Taking place largely in late summer and early autumn, one such factor was the opportunity to spend time outside in relatively good weather and pleasant surrounds:

> You know, it was summer, I was picking apples. It was lovely. Beautiful gardens generally, you know, really nice gardens. Yeah, it was just really good fun. (Sally)

You've got this great group of volunteers and it's a good afternoon, especially if the sun's shining. It's really good fun. (Marie)

Marie draws attention here to another key ingredient in the enjoyment of fruit picking: its inherent sociality, bringing a 'great group' of people together. As highlighted earlier, several participants saw their involvement in a harvesting group as a way to get to know and build relationships with other people in their immediate local area. More broadly, participants tended to see the opportunity to spend time with others – existing friends, new acquaintances and strangers – as something fun, and as a greater priority than getting free fruit. In Sophie's words, 'it's more of a social thing than a picking thing'. This was enhanced by the nature of the activity, requiring harvesters not only to be in the same, relatively confined space at the same time, but to work together to achieve a common goal, fostering a degree of mutual dependence, if only lasting for the duration of the pick:

It was absolutely exhilarating. It really put a smile on my face and lifted, you know, it was brilliant to see all these people working together and doing all this lovely stuff, and, you know, just feeling positive. (Karen)

As Katy explained, team working was best exemplified in the well-rehearsed technique of 'shaking the tree' (see Chapter 6), impossible without a coordinated group willing to play different roles and communicate with each other.

While coordination was essential to good team working, participants frequently stressed the informal, relaxed atmosphere that they associated with fruit harvesting as an important part of their enjoyment. For Sally this was about freedom from the burden of abiding by rules and regulations – 'there was no health and safety certificates and it was just people having a good time' – which she contrasted with the rigidity and bureaucracy of activities organised through larger, more established institutions:

If it was a council thing I wouldn't have turned up: too many boxes to tick. (Sally)

Others compared the lightness and enjoyability of harvesting with their previous experiences of volunteering or politically-oriented activities. Tom saw fun as a major contributor to the success of fruit harvesting groups in attracting new recruits and sustaining their interest:

> Why a lot of volunteering happens is people actively trying to be a good citizen and do things that are not in itself fun, but it's the giving that somehow makes it worthwhile. Abundance is different in that people actually do it, partly because it's good to do, but it's also just fun, and they draw so many people and they always will because it's a fun thing to be doing, and I think that's the key to why it's so successful. (Tom)

Karen, as a group coordinator, noted the informality of the structure and an absence of any 'obligation to turn up' as important factors. Similarly, Trish attributed her continued involvement to both the 'energy' of fruit harvesting and the lack of formal commitment to a volunteer role. Although also motivated by a desire to reduce waste, she went fruit picking primarily as a leisure pursuit rather than seeing it as a way of campaigning:

> As much as anything it's because I enjoy it … To do the political campaigning is hard work, you know; I don't think you can get round that. So to do something that's actually quite fun and neighbourly is more, as I say, like leisure than, you know, trying to save the world. (Trish)

Like fruit harvesting, skipping was seen by some participants as a convivial social event. For Sophie and Katy, as discussed earlier, it was an opportunity to meet up with friends and ride around various supermarket sites by bike; it was a 'cheeky thing' and would be 'boring to go alone'.

Another enjoyable aspect of skipping was the element of surprise, compared with the uniform, predictable experience of shopping in a supermarket (Fernandez et al., 2011). The fun was in 'seeing what you could get … like a treasure' (Sophie). As already seen, participants felt that taking goods from the waste stream removed both the financial and ethical burden of decision making, allowing them to get hold of food they would not normally choose to or be able to buy. Opening a bin to find something of this ilk was itself a source of excitement:

> Often stuff we'd get would be quite unusual. Like we could have got potatoes … but we wouldn't; we'd get the aubergines or the oranges or whatever, that normally we wouldn't be able to get so much. (Sophie)

> In some ways we would eat really well, because we would acquire food which we would never be able to afford, and there'd be a lot of variety of stuff that we wouldn't choose to buy. (Tom)

The downside to this inherent unpredictability, especially for those sourcing the majority of their food from bins, was that it sometimes meant limited choice over the variety and quality of food available:

> On the other hand we would find that we would make a meal with whatever we found. So sometimes we wouldn't eat very well because rather than designing a meal we were just trying to use what we could find. (Tom)

> I remember eating a lot of bread. I just remember, 'man, I'm getting through a lot of bread; this is way more bread than I would ever have eaten if I'd have been buying food'. (Stu)

However, as Tom went on to reflect, this lack of choice had its own positive side, serving as a way of being introduced to new culinary experiences:

> You get stuff that you were not in the habit of buying, that you get to try. Stuff that you wouldn't have thought of trying. (Tom)

Online reuse was comparatively likely to be seen, first and foremost, as a cost-effective and convenient means to an end, as a way of connecting people or of reducing waste. That said, participants did also enjoy the experience itself. Some, like Carole and Pat enjoyed the human interaction and the sense of helping people out. For others there was a particular satisfaction in succeeding at reuse. Sandra, for instance, described her involvement, primarily giving things away, as 'a bit of a hobby', even keeping an electronic record of all the items she had exchanged through the network. Similarly, Vicky set herself the 'exciting challenge' of getting everything she needed for pregnancy through free online reuse.

Echoing the motivations of the skippers above, Vicky also made reference to enjoying the 'surprise element' of acquiring things through reuse networks,

again comparing this to more mainstream shopping practices: 'Some people don't like that. They want to go to a shop, they want to look at it, they want to know'. By contrast, she enjoyed the unpredictability of going to collect items of uncertain quality and condition, and was only occasionally disappointed:

> I still do find the whole experience of Freecycle really good fun … you know, it's a two-line email; you don't really know what you're gonna get. You go and get it and, you know, it's a pleasant surprise. (Vicky)

For Vicky, this aspect of online reuse made it similar to other alternative consumption practices that she frequently engaged in, including salvaging from skips and buying from charity shops. Beverly described her enjoyment of using reuse networks in quite different terms. As a self-confessed 'shopaholic' she saw a great deal of continuity between the way she used to enjoy shopping in a conventional retail setting and her more recent use of second hand sources: the excitement derived from the act of seeking things out and acquiring them was largely the same in both contexts:

> I get a real buzz out of buying anything or getting anything, you know. Yeah it's something that really makes me happy. Years ago, when I was working, I'd have store cards, and if I was feeling a bit fed up I'd go and buy something on my store card. Fatal. Now if I get a bit like that I think, eBay, what can I look for? Or Freecycle the same. (Beverly)

7.3 The underlying significance of consumption choices

Interviews also shed light on a different set of narratives underlying why participants engaged in reclamation practices. These relate to the significance of their engagement: what (if anything) they hoped to achieve by consuming in particular ways or why it mattered to them. Again, many participants mobilised a number of parallel narratives. Often they were concerned with meeting practical needs, but simultaneously wanted to do so in a manner consistent with what they felt was the right thing to do, or through which they sought to effect wider positive impacts.

Meeting (material) needs

Many participants saw reclaiming practices above all as a pragmatic response to identified need. On the one hand, people sought particular goods, from food to home furnishings, and these alternative channels served as an affordable and convenient means to achieving this end. Paul and Tom, for example, both described sourcing a significant proportion of their food from supermarket bins while Stu, as highlighted earlier, recalled a particular period in his life when he was reliant on doing so due to his limited finances. First and foremost, skipping was, in his case, a way to serve a private, instrumental end: 'I go to the bins for my own sake, for my own benefit'. Others underlined the role online reuse networks had played in helping to furnish their home or in providing for their children. Vicky gave examples of both:

> So with my third child I got, you know, I got pretty much everything she needed [through Freecycle].

> I moved into an unfurnished house … and it took me two months, or less, six weeks, to furnish my whole house off Freecycle. (Vicky)

Involvement in fruit harvesting was rarely driven by the participants' own need for food, but it was often about meeting the needs of others, by picking fruit and distributing it to various organisations that could pass it on to their often vulnerable clients. Several group coordinators, when describing their successes to date, emphasised the impact on people that they had helped feed:

> It's been really well received all round, and obviously the organisations that we take the fruit to, they use it and dish it out to their clients. (Karen)

> The nurseries and the charities have been really enthusiastic; they've been overjoyed really to receive free fruit … cos we give the fruit to Refugee Action, a local charity, and a lot of their members are kind of from poor socioeconomic kind of backgrounds so they don't necessarily have access to cheap healthy foods. (Marie)

On the other hand, while recipients were clear beneficiaries, many of those giving things away were in fact meeting material needs of their own: decluttering, creating space, ridding themselves of unwanted matter. As Andrew observed, fruit harvesting initiatives help tree owners to deal with a potentially

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problematic quantity of unwanted produce: 'they've got maybe a hundred kilos of waste that they have to deal with, so actually it's doing them a favour, clearing their rubbish'. Similarly, numerous members of reuse networks reflected on how, when donating their old things to people that could make use of them, they were actually serving their own interests at the same time, a mutually advantageous 'win-win' situation:

> Fraser: Oh there's something in it for us, but that's the joy of it, is that you know it's a way of encouraging you to do it. Not only do you help someone else, but you also help yourself.
> Susan: By someone normally coming to collect it.
> Fraser: So self-interest is certainly, I think, a motivator. Yeah, it's a motivator.

Satisfaction and fulfilment

While the above examples emphasise functionality – achieving ends and meeting needs – participants also described less tangible, more emotionally-charged or sensory benefits of their engagement in alternative consumption practices, making frequent reference to the satisfaction and fulfilment they gained in the process. This is perhaps most obviously demonstrated by those participants who, as already seen, talked about fun, excitement and conviviality as central to their motivations.

Alongside enjoying the activity of consuming in alternative ways, aesthetic appreciation of the goods themselves was in many cases a central consideration. Urban fruit harvesters were far more likely to bear witness to their sensory encounters with freshly picked apples and pears than they were to consider them a source of nutrition, for themselves at least. Participants frequently contrasted the fruit they picked with what they considered to be an inferior product on sale in the typical supermarket. Sally recalled, with relish, a particular pear harvest:

> Sally: I mean I don't think I even got home with that bag cos they were so sweet.
> Ruth: Whereas most pears you get at the supermarket are rock hard and don't really taste of anything much.

Sally: Yeah. So that was particularly lovely to taste something that you've picked and it was so beautiful, you know. And just to eat it there and then, so that was nice.

As well as its comparative freshness and ripeness, many appreciated the diversity of the fruit found in local gardens. It was not only enjoyable to sample these different varieties, but also stimulating to learn about them:

There are so many different types! And like understanding how some of them are like gonna die out if people don't keep harvesting or like how, you know, they just all taste different and I think that's really something we shouldn't desert, because it's part of our heritage. It's just a shame if we only have like six types of apples that are in the supermarkets and they don't even taste that great. Like when you taste a really good pear from a [local] tree. (Sophie)

Satisfaction was also associated with a feeling of having achieved something worthwhile. This took numerous forms. Sophie, for example, continued to explain her enjoyment of harvesting. In addition to being fresher and more varied than supermarket produce, she ascribed more value to the fruit they collected precisely because of the effort she had invested in picking it: 'it's kind of like when you make a cake and it's actually like a bit rubbish but you just love it because you made it yourself'. There was a direct link between the work put in and the enjoyment of its outcomes. Craig, also reflecting on his experiences of fruit harvesting, highlighted a quite different sense of achievement:

I get a certain satisfaction from, in a sense, getting something for free. It's just the trees can be so plentiful, there can be so much fruit, and you put in a minimal amount of effort and you have 30, 40, 50 kilos of apples or pears or plums. (Craig)

Here it was the idea of acquiring good stuff without having to pay for it, and indeed only expending minimal effort, that constituted the achievement. Other participants shared this view that it felt good to get something for free, in a way that went beyond the economic calculus of budgeting and the satisfying of material needs. Rather than being framed as a response to scarcity, this was more a celebration of abundance, as captured in the name of many fruit harvesting groups. With reference to online reuse, and second hand sources of goods more generally, Beverly and Naomi both described their 'love' of hunting

for a bargain, while Vicky explained that the idea of saving money heightened her existing enjoyment of shopping:

> I do like getting a new top, you know, so I get that same satisfaction that someone gets, but I think I get extra satisfaction that it's not very much money. (Vicky)

Paul liked cycling because 'it's cheap and efficient', but also because it was effectively fuelled by salvaging discarded food for free:

> I actually enjoy the fact that even the energy that does come from my legs has come for nothing cos it's come from food that I haven't had to pay for.

> It pleases me to think that you can get something for nothing or you can take wind, energy from the wind and turn it into electricity and charge batteries and, erm, that inspires me. I like that, not even from an environmental point of view, but just because it's fun. It feels like you're getting something for nothing and I enjoy that, looking for ways to utilise what's already here. (Paul)

At the end of the above quote Paul hints at another type of achievement that made participants feel good. They gained satisfaction from seeing things used, seeing the potential in an object extended, in not seeing it go to waste, or in taking something that was not quite usable, fixing it up or repurposing it:

> I really liked that sensation or that feeling of being able to harvest something and distribute it, or to put it to good use, and that certainly keeps the enjoyment factor up for me. (Craig)

Finally, several participants described how they enjoyed helping other people, especially in being able to meet their specific needs through giving something away:

> I think the idea of giving is so important to me. I think that's where I get my satisfaction from in life, just helping other people. (Pat)

> It's a nice feeling when people are really pleased with something that you give them. (Beverly)

As Beverly suggests, this 'nice feeling' was in part driven by the response of the recipient: their pleasure in receiving an item that would be beneficial to their particular circumstances. Like Sophie above, who enjoyed the fruit she picked

all the more because she had been involved in the harvest, satisfaction was here enhanced by the direct connection between the act of giving and the impact on the recipient, seemingly in contrast to the more abstract experience of, for example, donating money to charity.

Doing the right thing

These first two sets of explanations were primarily about benefits arising to the individual concerned. However, as the last examples demonstrate, there is some overlap between acting out of interest for others and deriving personal satisfaction. I now move on to look at the different ways that activity was directed towards external concerns. Shortly I will consider how some participants felt their actions would 'make a difference' in various ways. However, for some the significance of their engagement in reclamation practices was framed not exclusively in terms of outcomes or consequences, but rather as what might be termed a response to moral duty: their concern was with doing the right thing (for its own sake) or avoiding doing the wrong thing.

As became clear earlier in the chapter, although many were able to articulate well thought out reasons as to why waste should be avoided, often what was expressed in the first instance was a strongly felt aversion to waste: a deep-seated conviction that it is wrong to throw things away or use things up unnecessarily. So, for example, Vicky felt it was 'absolutely shameful the stuff that is thrown away', and as Beverly said, 'I hate throwing anything away'. Similar sentiments applied to participants' other areas of concern. For instance, Paul was motivated by a reaction to social injustice, manifest in stark material inequalities and what he considered the profligacy and greed of the relatively affluent:

> I've come to really hate the unfairness of a world that actually is full of plenty, resources, skills – we've all got loads going for us – and yet we either squander it or just steal it, or hoard it, so that there's a huge imbalance. (Paul)

And Tom repeatedly underlined his commitment to activities that help 'build community', in this sense characterised by mutual interdependence amongst groups of people. For him this meant taking steps to disrupt his own habits,

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rooted in the prevailing wisdom of individual self-reliance, in this particular case by knocking on a neighbour's door to ask for help:

> I would say I would actively rebel against that even if it is harder. I would want to do it because of the principle of it, because it's ridiculous that that's the world that we're in. So I will fight against it even if it's hard. Even if it is harder to knock on someone's door. (Tom)

To Tom it was important to proactively pursue opportunities like this 'because of the principle of it'. Other participants used similar terminology, emphasising the attempt to live in a way that was as consistent as possible with their sense of what was right, independently of any further outcomes that might be desired and may or may not be achieved:

> I think I just try and do what feels like the right thing to do; whyever I do that I don't know. (Simon)

Paul, Andrew and Faye all said they tried to live with 'integrity'. Sophie wanted to 'live by [her] values' and not to be a 'hypocrite'. Alice said she would rather 'have no money and go through a skip to get [her] dinner, than sell [her] soul'. Several participants explicitly contrasted their principled action with primarily change-oriented behaviour, for example:

> I'm not an activist as such … this is what I believe is right and this is the way I want to live. (Karen)

While in many cases they also hoped to make a difference in some way, they were not optimistic about their scope to do so or the scale of change that could be achieved. However, importantly, they continued to follow these principles regardless of these expectations:

> I don't think you're gonna solve all these problems. I think they're gonna still always be there, but I'm happy contributing my side, you know; doing my bit. (Ali)

> The impact is tiny. I don't kid myself that the odd thing that I'm passing on is going to make any difference to sort of global warming or anything like that, but it's a sort of principle. And it's the same reason that I recycle things that I can recycle, and try and avoid packaging and all that sort of stuff, you know, in other aspects of my

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life. And I know that the actions that I take are not going to make much difference but it's a sort of principle thing. (Kirsty)

I now turn attention to the ways participants imagined they could make a positive impact, however modestly, through the way they consumed.

Making a difference

First, some participants talked about the direct, tangible impacts of their engagement in reclamation practices. Most commonly this meant a (theoretically) measurable reduction in the amount of waste produced, however small, compared with if they had used different channels for acquiring or disposing of goods. For Paul, one of the key drivers to his going skipping was to help reduce the quantity of usable food ultimately discarded by supermarkets, and to encourage other people to do the same:

> So until that resource is depleted, erm, I'd like to encourage as many people as possible to use that resource … until there was no waste in the bins. Or the waste in the bins was waste because it couldn't be used for a better– we'd run out of ways that we could make it better … so that's probably the thing that drives me most. (Paul)

While participants were modest about the scale of their individual contributions, their logic was typically that, if every item diverted from landfill in a given location was added together, the sum total would amount to a small but noticeable, incremental impact:

> I think in concrete terms, the fact that we're keeping so much out of landfill is the main sort of side benefit, if you like, cos if you sort of were to look at everything that all the people in just one town have Freecycled over a specific period of time– if you, say, looked at five years' worth of stuff in one city … it would be the most massive amount of stuff. And so I think this is the way it can slowly and just a tiny bit change the world. (Sandra)

> [I've] done a back of the envelope calculation. I can't remember what it is, but whatever million kilos of fruit that are wasted, you know, we're picking one and a half tonnes in a small area and scratching the surface. You start multiplying that and it does, you know, it does get significant. (Andrew)

This sort of rationale continues, as Andrew noted, from addition to multiplication. If the amount of waste already being saved by a relatively small number of people were extrapolated across larger sections of the population then the results would become significant. Craig shared a similar hope with regard to a different but related aim of fruit harvesting projects, to feed hungry people using food diverted from the waste stream:

> In terms of food poverty as a whole … we offer a tiny, tiny solution to a tiny part of the problem. And I'm totally aware of that. But, nevertheless, if hypothetically everybody invested even just a few hours a month in a project like Abundance or redistributing food that's almost at its sell-by date but not quite, then there would definitely be a cumulative effort and it would have cumulative results, so I always bear that in mind. So that's enough to keep the despondency at bay. (Craig)

Although there was hope expressed in this logic of increasing participation in reclaiming practices, with wider impacts on waste and household food security, this was tempered by recognition that there were limits to how widely such practices were likely to spread. Carole felt that the potential appeal of reuse was restricted to only 'a certain number of people': 'I can't see it making a huge difference really'. Craig acknowledged an aspiration within fruit harvesting groups to help change the way people consume on a wider scale, but felt this was 'an enormous project' that 'to get any meaningful results would surely take years, maybe decades', after which point the degree of environmental damage whether relating to the treatment and storage of refuse or global climate change might be irresolvably severe. Similarly, Andrew was 'not greatly optimistic' about achieving change on a sufficiently large or systemic scale.

A second sense in which people talked about their consumption choices making a difference was by its indirect market influence. By acquiring in alternative ways they were helping to reduce the demand for goods manufactured, distributed or sold in circumstances that they found ethically dubious, such as involving exploitative labour relations or causing ecological harm. In turn, this reduced demand, translated as a lack of support for questionable business practices, would attract the attention of the manufacturers and retailers

concerned, allowing social and environmental costs to register as financial ones, with the hope that the problematic ways of operating might be changed.

This sort of rationale, akin to Micheletti's (2003) notion of political consumerism, was familiar to participants but given surprisingly little weight in explaining why they engaged in reclamation practices. This could reflect the specific ways of consuming discussed, situated 'outside' the formal economy; had the interviews been about buying fair trade goods then narratives of communicating preferences via financially supporting, or withdrawing support from, particular business models might have been more prevalent.

Where participants did make reference to this indirect form of impact, they tended to emphasise the first part of the formulation – the reduction of demand and the withdrawal of backing – over any expectation that this might lead to changes in how businesses operate. As highlighted in Section 7.2, discarded food was commonly understood as free from the chains of consequences that were attached to paid-for food. To use Tom's phrase, 'things that were unethical become ethical because they're in a bin'. When further unpacked, skippers felt that they were not responsible for these consequences since they were not 'funding' the activities they disagreed with:

> Whatever you kind of spend your time doing or you buy or whatever is you giving your support to that kind of thing isn't it? … It's not like you're giving that company supplies or money or support, if you're getting it from a bin. (Katy)

> Tom: You're not funding the chain. The consumer is partly responsible for everything that's happened along that chain, but I think once it gets thrown away, I feel like–
> MF: You're not contributing to the demand for it?
> Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Stu, who described himself as 'a vegetarian normally', was happy to eat meat if it had been thrown away (cf. Corman, 2011), for the same reason:

> But when it comes to bins, obviously, it's gonna go to waste. It's not gonna contribute to the meat industry. By me eating that meat that's come out of a bin or that's going into a bin from someone's plate isn't

gonna give any more money into the meat industry whatsoever. So it's kind of guilt free in my opinion. (Stu)

Some participants made a connection between objects whose lives were being extended through reuse, or fruit that was being eaten rather than rotting on the ground, and the level of demand for new goods being produced and sold. By reusing things, as well as reducing the burden on landfill they were delaying the need for a replacement item to be bought:

> If you're in a constant throwaway society, then it's got to be replaced. Well, it's got to be stored and decayed, [and] it's got to be replaced. And both of those take energy in one form or another, and in some cases resources that are not freely available, so yes I think there is definitely a correlation between the two. (David)

Similarly, in reference to harvesting unwanted fruit:

> It displaces what perhaps otherwise would have been bought in a supermarket and flown from New Zealand. (Craig)

Again, the impacts of such market influences were assessed modestly. Olivia felt there was, to date, little evidence of any effect on volumes of sales, reflecting the huge difference of scale between commercial retail operations and reuse activity:

> So there's way too much trade going on for Freecycle or Freegle to have had such a big impact. So, you don't see any sudden drop in sales because Freegle just started happening in that specific city. So I'm not saying they don't have any impact at all, but it's still small. It's still small. (Olivia)

Meanwhile, Katy questioned the logic of 'withdrawing' demand (by skipping) when she would have been unlikely to 'support' those businesses in the first place:

> It's not like we buy stuff from supermarkets anyway, but if we were the people to buy stuff from supermarkets we'd be buying less cos we'd got it from the bin, but we're not so it's kind of irrelevant. (Katy)

A common feature of the two, direct and indirect senses of 'making a difference' considered so far is the foregrounding of what might be called *quantitative* concerns. The objective is a decrease in the overall volume of waste matter

generated through consumption, or a reduction in the number of units sold and the corresponding profits to the companies that make and sell them, both in ways that can be counted, measured, logged in a spreadsheet, added, subtracted, multiplied and divided. The combined efforts of multiple individual actors add up precisely to the sum of their parts. Impact increases proportionately with the number of people involved and the extent of their involvement. Conversely, the limited size of this involvement, relative to the scale of the problems that it confronts, is evidence for its limited success: it is a 'drop in the ocean' (Andrew).[22]

However, a third sense in which participants hoped to have impact on the world around them was, for want of a more original analogous term, *qualitative* (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). The targets of change were less tangible and less easy to count or measure than volumes of waste or of sales. Participants wanted to change the way they acted, the way they understood and interacted with and spoke about their social and physical environment. And they wanted this change to rub off on those around them, influencing social practices, discourses, values, cultures, spreading out from their close friends and family to their wider communities and networks, and beyond. Often this was combined with a desire to see impact of a more quantitative nature: by changing the way they consume, and encouraging others to do likewise, they might help decrease the volume of rubbish going to landfill, reduce the demand for certain products and increase it for others. In other instances the hoped-for change in practice or culture was a sufficient end in its own right.

A key feature of this understanding of making a difference was that it should be on a 'grassroots' basis, beginning at a local level and emerging from the bottom up. For Faye, who said she saw her 'way of being as political activism', the most important concern, and the most effective place to begin, was to question and try to change her own actions:

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[22] It is worth noting that this is an ideal-typical characterisation of quantitative notions of impact. Research participants that made reference to this type of summative logic rarely did so in the distilled form I describe here or in isolation from other rationales.

It'd be lovely to think that I would change the world, but actually I think the only world I can change is mine, and me, and that that has its influence in itself. (Faye)

By doing so, she captured the attention of people immediately around her, prompting conversation and reflection, possibly even action. Those people might then prompt others, slightly further removed, to talk and think and do:

I really think … the way that you live and then influence even a handful of people and they can influence other people, I think that's extremely powerful. And I think that's the way to go. I think that is what happens and people gradually get the message. (Pat)

You can only change the world little bit by little bit. And the best way to change it is from the bottom up, so that you radiate your thoughts and your ideas to other people. (Karen)

Shifting metaphor to that of radiation, Karen illustrated change as occurring from the inside out, diverging in all directions from a central point. Pat's depiction is perhaps closer to conduction, where energy is transferred along a series of adjacent particles, sequentially rubbing up against and agitating each other. Others participants imagined their actions as minor disturbances on the surface of water:

Fraser: I would say that it's a local effect, but like ripples in a pond. They can only go so far, but equally they'll spread out.
Susan: And I've definitely been the stone that makes the ripples.

So I get quite excited about the ripple effect. You don't know what's happening, you know, where they'll take it next. (Marie)

There was a strong discursive aspect to these understandings of change, with an emphasis on prompting others (and themselves) to stop, take notice and question their routine ways of thinking, speaking and acting, and explore what alternatives to this might look like. In part this meant arresting existing habits: doing something 'a bit different, a bit disruptive' (Andrew). This might take the form of a simple conversation that gently challenges a point of view:

It's talking to people, like having conversations like this. Sparking up a conversation with someone at the bus stop, seeing what they think about things and offering a different– in a very non sort of in-your-

face way. 'Oh well, have you thought that maybe this, or that, or the other?' and just, you know, planting little seeds. (Alice)

Andrew felt a key facet of urban fruit harvesting was its role in 'awareness raising', again implying an awakening of discursive consciousness and questioning of behaviour. Craig and Marie gave similar perspectives:

> I think it's quite important then that people are made aware of where their food comes from, you know, just exactly what is on their doorstep, and then hopefully people are better informed, they're able to make better informed decisions about what food they buy, from where, at what time of the year. (Craig)

> I think it's about getting people to think about their actions … it's a resource that I think people should be made aware [of] and they should have access to. (Marie)

Another discursive element was in challenging assumptions about possibility, power and the nature of political action. On the one hand, several participants were explicit in distancing themselves and what they did from what they considered to be 'politics', or at least from formal party politics and the functioning of government. They were more interested in taking responsibility for changing the world around them than appealing to somebody else to act on their behalf. Karen, despite being adamant that she was 'not an activist', was unambiguous: 'I hate the government and I think the more we take power out of their hands, the better'. Paul felt this power was already present, but needed to be recognised, named and claimed:

> All of us have got loads of power really, but while we think we haven't we're powerless, and it's not just persuading ministers; it's actually, really, once someone believes, once we're properly persuaded about anything, then you can't stop somebody really. (Paul)

Change-oriented action of the type described here is, in a sense, self-referential. One of its goals is self-empowerment, challenging the actor's perceptions of what can be achieved. By acting *as though* the action will make a difference, he or she achieves that goal (while continuing to pursue others), blurring the distinction between means and ends.

On the other hand, this same positive, celebratory, 'can do' spirit distinguished these particular forms of grassroots action from what participants saw as a prevailing negativity in much social and environmental campaigning, identifying problems and targets of criticism without proposing to do much in response:

> I didn't want to thrust all that environmental stuff at people cos I think people are genuinely scared by it and they think you're a bit of a crackpot … I didn't want to sell the fruit collective as this environmental– you know, 'let's go and get them; make all the world right again'; I just wanted it to be something that was fun to engage in, which I think is what it's turned out to be. (Karen)

> One other kind of short term aim is to bring people together, to celebrate what we've got on offer. I think a lot of environmental campaigning is really negative and I mean that's part of what attracted me to Transition Towns, the Transition movement, is that it takes more of a positive, proactive response to the problems that we're facing … and I think, you know, we just want to build that sense of community really and what better than doing it through food, you know. It puts a smile on everyone's face. (Marie)

The emphasis on being proactive raises one further important feature of these 'qualitative' formulations of change. While a central concern was with raising awareness, changing perceptions and shifting terms of debate, this was to be achieved in and through practice: not only by appealing to the intellect, persuading people with sound argument (although conversation was a key tactic, and is a form of practice in itself), but by doing and sharing and showing: 'it's very much in just how you live your life' (Alice). Tom called this 'prophetic living'; a more secular synonym might be living *prefiguratively*. Partly this was about creating a space for experimentation and learning: trying things out to see if they work; practising how to act and relate to others in the type of world that is hoped for and being worked towards; training to become a skilled practitioner of those ways of acting and being. Paul, for example, when collecting food from bins, dividing it up into boxes and delivering it to his friends, felt that he was learning how to share material things and care for those around him, part of his wider vision for a transformed economy:

> My secret ambition is … that we learn how to care for each other … I can do a bit of the hard work, you know, get my hands dirty or

whatever, and then I'll want to say 'well now I've got all this stuff I can share it with others'. And we can learn how to share, which does involve those little boxes for me. (Paul)

Similarly, 'spending time hanging out with people in my street' was, for Paul, a small step towards 'us humans learning to get on' and a more effective response, he felt, than waiting for elected representatives to bring about change. Practising developed confidence as well as skills, aiding the process of becoming empowered through recognising and claiming the ability to effect change, as seen earlier:

> We don't believe that what we do will have enough of an impact to be worth doing and so we don't [do it] … I can see that we just need a bit of nudging, you know, a bit of stimulating: have a go; try and think about how you could share that thing you're just about to buy at the till, you know. Okay, that's what I need too; … we can actually just start to have little glimpses of hope. (Paul)

These glimpses of hope were encouraging for participants themselves, but also for people around them. Belonging to a group of people invested in an activity, rather than working in isolation, had practical advantages, but it also had symbolic benefits, helping those involved to feel part of something bigger than what their individual efforts could achieve. Working together added value over and above the sum of the parts:

> I think it's also the groups being there so other people feel, you know, it's part of a wider movement and other people who share those concerns can feel some validation. (Andrew)

Experimenting with doing consumption differently meant convincing oneself, but also demonstrating to others, that alternatives are viable and that change is possible. Ultimately things can be different in the future to how they are at present:

> I remember when I first became a vegetarian, and I think all the time I've not had a car, it's partly about saying to other people around me this is not necessary: it's actually possible to survive without eating meat; it's possible to not have a car … I'm sure it doesn't make any significant impact on the environment generally, but it's sort of symbolic; it shows it's possible. And sometimes it influences other people. They think 'well maybe we don't need one either', or 'maybe

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we only need one', or 'maybe we can do this by bus' or, you know, 'maybe we can cycle or walk' or whatever. I hope that people might. (Kirsty)

The recurring idea was that showing an alternative to be possible, and good, was both ethically preferable and more effective than instructing people to change their ways. And, as Karen noted, often a successful way to demonstrate the viability of something different was to encourage those other people to get involved in experimenting with alternatives themselves. Crucially, it was assumed that such involvement might lead to a change in their understanding or what they valued, rather than the other way round:

> It's a big step for people but they kind of get it and they kind of accept it because when it happens they can see the benefits of it. Sometimes after the event, you know, they get it later on. So that's alright. I'm happy if people behave in green ways without fully understanding the big picture. That's ok with me. (Pat)

I return to these questions of how social networks introduce people to alternative practices, and how active engagement helps shape what matters to them, in Chapter 9.

7.4 Conclusions

In this chapter I have demonstrated the multiple, overlapping, complementary and sometimes conflicting ways that participants made sense of their engagement in reclamation practices. An in-depth approach to the research and analysis has helped uncover the range of these different narratives and begun to question how they interact. Participants were concerned, often simultaneously, with meeting mundane material needs, with helping others around them and with avoiding or intervening in the problematic chains of connection they associated with conventional ways of acquiring and disposing of goods. This chapter has also begun to shed light on participants' own understandings of the political potential of everyday life. Many referred to traits of ordinary prefigurative politics (as introduced in Chapter 3), including demonstrating to others that alternative social arrangements are possible through the way they live their lives. I return to their experiences of doing so in Chapter 9.

I now move on to look at how participants navigate between multiple choices on a day-to-day basis: why, in a given situation, they acquire or dispose via a particular channel, rather than any of the range of other channels available.

Chapter eight: negotiating consumption choices in everyday life

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 7 I uncovered some of the reasons that people engage in alternative consumption practices. In this chapter I begin to explore the ongoing negotiations that people undertake. They continue to 'choose' (however loosely defined) certain practices over other practices, these conduits over those ones, on a day-to-day basis. What is more, in doing so they negotiate multiple, at times complementary and at times contradictory, rationales.

I begin in Section 8.2 by detailing various other ways of acquiring and disposing of goods employed by participants in addition to online reuse, fruit harvesting and skipping, highlighting how in any given situation they prioritise between them. In Section 8.3 I move on to uncover the different ways participants attributed value to things and to courses of action, highlighting how competing notions of worth interact and sometimes come into conflict. Finally, in Section 8.4, I consider how participants coped with and lived in the tensions arising from these multiple priorities, especially when ethical dispositions came into conflict with other schemes of evaluation.

8.2 Navigating multiple conduits

Participants' lives were, on the whole, marked by continuity, regularity and routine. Correspondingly their use of particular channels for acquisition and disposal was typically described in terms of ongoing patterns and tendencies, rather than agonising over standalone choices in a string of isolated instances. Occasionally, as will be explored in Chapter 9, these patterns were disrupted and new ones formed, at times bringing into focus the tensions between competing rationales. For the most part, though, a given set of conduits tended to be used on an ongoing basis, with particular choices favoured for getting hold or getting rid of particular types of goods (Gregson et al., 2007b).

Shopping and skipping: in the front door or round the back?

For many of the skippers in the sample, salvaging discarded food accounted for only a small proportion of their regular food intake. Although discussion tended to centre on the times they did go skipping (as the main focus of the interview), some participants described in detail their use of other sources of food and what influenced their choosing between them. Sophie and Katy, together with their housemates, tried to avoid buying food from supermarkets. Their main supply of fresh fruit and vegetables was through a weekly veg box delivery scheme, reflecting their preferences for local, seasonal and organic produce. Every four or five weeks they bought their 'staples' from a large cooperatively-run wholefood wholesaler, whose practices and organising structures they felt were consistent with their own priorities, but also simultaneously for reasons of cost and convenience: 'it's kind of cheaper and easier, but then also it's like supporting a cooperative and you just kind of get it in a bigger amount so you don't have to keep going back' (Katy). In comparison to these routine provisioning activities, skipping was more irregular – supplementing their usual food consumption – and undertaken as an enjoyable social activity in its own right (see Chapter 7). Sophie reflected on how this had changed since moving in with her current housemates. Being able to source what she considered ethical food, through communally buying a veg box and making regular trips to the cooperative together, had effectively replaced her previously more solitary experience of skipping as a main food source:

> I'm really happy to live here with people who I feel like I can share things with, when before … it would have been difficult for me to get a veg box … and share it amongst people I lived with. So before this year I used to go to bins a lot more, maybe like twice a week. Erm, now we get the veg box so I don't have to do that. (Sophie)

While the veg box and the cooperative provided Sophie and Katy with most of their staple food, they tended to buy 'luxuries' – the examples given included chocolate, tofu, tahini, aubergines and sweet potatoes – from either a small independent 'international' supermarket or, less frequently, a larger chain supermarket, the latter also providing their nearest skipping site. The point here is that although consciously avoiding major supermarkets in their routine food

shopping, this was not a strict rule and would be relaxed 'if there's something we haven't got that we particularly need'. That said, there was an understanding that this particular chain of supermarkets (Waitrose) was ethically preferable to others (Aldi), which would be avoided.

Stu told a similar story. Skipping had previously been his primary source of food, but recently it had become less convenient to do so. The bins he previously visited were no longer on his route home and so he would now only go if he happened to be passing. Where possible he preferred to buy healthy food – 'grains and stuff' – from the same wholefood cooperative as Sophie and Katy, and also eat locally-sourced food. However, this ethically-motivated impulse was in tension with making the best use of his limited free time:

> I think it's sad but convenience kind of does get priority at the moment, at this time in my life, partly because I'm working full time and there's not that many shops round here that sell local food. But if there was a shop round here that sold local fruit and veg I'd go there without a doubt above any supermarket. (Stu)

In present circumstances Stu was reluctantly resigned to prioritising convenience and sometimes buying food from supermarkets. However, like Sophie and Katy above, he described a sort of hierarchy of retailers in terms of their relative ethical credentials, from the ideal, through the acceptable, to the completely off-limits:

> I never go to Tescos or Asda or anything. Sainsbury's and Co-op are the only ones I go to. I don't know if Sainsbury's might be just as bad as Tesco; I'm not sure. But they have certain policies I've seen that are quite good in terms of sustainable– I dunno; they're at least aware of it. I dunno. I can't justify it really. Ideally everything that I ate would be locally sourced and not involve a big company. (Stu)

This quote starts to give an impression not only of the complexity and, at times, fluidity of choosing between conduits, but also the subjective experience of doing so, marked by frustration, uncertainty and living in tension between competing priorities. I return to this in more detail in Section 8.3.

Even when skipping accounted for the vast majority of food consumed, participants still made use of a range of different channels for acquisition. This

was a function of the unpredictable selection of food available on any given visit to the bins, in terms of variety, quantity and quality, and also the fact that certain items were rarely discarded by supermarkets. As Stu recalled from a period when he was living almost entirely on skipped food:

> I did go and buy things because there is certain things that you never get in the bins that are really useful, like cooking oil, salt, I dunno. Things that just don't go off. (Stu)

Similarly, Paul's first priority was to source food from bins, but he would make a judgement on the basis of need and availability and top up on other items – milk, sugar, coffee – from the supermarket. Paul stressed that the criteria for making this judgement were 'not rigid'; they were changeable according to a subjective evaluation of whether it was 'worth' buying something, how much he wanted it and how likely he was to find it in a bin. Decision making was also responsive to the particular, unpredictable contents of the bin on a given day. Paul and his partner would even visit a supermarket in tandem, communicating while one was in the shop and the other in the bin:

> Abby will go in the front door because she wants some quinoa, or something that's unlikely to be available in the bin, erm, but I might sort of text her to say 'don't buy milk; I've found loads' or something while I'm round the back, you know. Erm, so yeah, so that's quite funny. (Paul)

Diverse economies of second hand goods

In the same way, participants situated their use of online reuse networks relative to other methods of acquiring and disposing of durable goods. Again this was often described in terms of a loose pecking order or continuum of more and less desirable options where 'the tip would be the last resort' (Carole), to be avoided wherever practical (see also Gregson et al., 2007b). For example, when giving an item away, some preferred to do so via close personal relationships, opening the offer out to the wider network of the reuse group if necessary:

> Some of the stuff I give away, I give to friends and family; other things I put on Freegle. It's very much in that order. (Ruth)

If I've got something to give away I always try to ask first if there's anyone in the family wants it, my son and his wife particularly. I'm always like giving them stuff and they'll say stop bringing crap to my house. (Beverly)

Participants also routinely used different conduits for different types of objects. Sally often gave things away by leaving them on the wall outside her home for others to take, something she said was common on her street. However, this was not always appropriate for bulky items, in which case she might prefer to advertise online via her local reuse network: 'I think it would be difficult to put a three piece suite on my wall, so for stuff like that I think Freecycle's just fantastic'. Similarly, charity shops were seen as a good source of cheap, second-hand clothes, and a good place to donate them, but in many cases they would not accept or sell other items such as large pieces of furniture or electrical goods. The first online reuse groups were initially set up to fill this gap and they continue to do so:

I would almost always give stuff to charity shops if I felt it had any real usable value and if it was of a size that could be taken to a charity shop easily … The kinds of stuff that I would use on Freecycle are the kinds of things that charity shops wouldn't want, or are too big for charity shops, and yeah, we just had a whole long list of things like that which we thought 'what will we do with this stuff?', cos I'm sure somebody could use it. (Kirsty)

Here Kirsty drew attention to another distinction, not only in the type of objects but also the condition they were in: whether or not they 'had any real usable value'. Recurring amongst users of reuse networks was the idea that such mechanisms were ideally suited to giving away items that 'somebody could use', but that they might not be willing to pay for, that might need to be repaired or repurposed, or where the appeal was not broad enough to be worth the investment (e.g. time, or shop space) in trying to sell:

It's things which I know charity shops wouldn't want because … they have faults or they don't meet modern safety requirements or they're just basically junk to be quite honest. (Kirsty)

A common point of discussion was the relationship – again often alluding to a hierarchy of preference – between using monetary and non-monetary

mechanisms for acquiring and disposing of goods. When looking for specific items, Freecycle or Freegle was, for some, a starting point before deciding to spend money elsewhere. As shown in Chapter 7, a common reason for getting things through online reuse networks was to save money. It made sense to participants to use these, or other low cost second hand channels, before considering more expensive options:

> Why pay for something if something is available free or cheap? That would kind of be a basic thought process. (Naomi)

> A kid's pair of shoes costs 35 quid if you go into a shop ... and their feet are growing all the time. So why on earth wouldn't you use something like eBay or Freecycle or whatever to get stuff from them? (Emily)

An interesting point raised by Emily in this quote is that free online reuse networks on the one hand, and informal spaces where goods are exchanged for money (most commonly eBay, but also classified adverts and car boot sales) on the other, were more often characterised by their mutual similarity than by their difference, and by their shared distinctness from the more formal retail economy:

> The reason why eBay is a good thing is because you're basically giving something that's yours, at a very low cost, to someone who needs it. And Freecycle does that for free locally, and so I do relate the two things on a kind of spectrum to each other.

> So in my mind I have a spectrum. I have selling on Friday Ad, selling on eBay and then I Freecycle some stuff. (Anita)

As the metaphor of a spectrum suggests, differences between these channels were more 'of degree' than 'of kind'. Participants gave varying rationales for choosing between them as means of disposal. Some prioritised convenience, lack of effort or economical use of time. Pat used free online reuse to get rid of 'big items … that we could get money for, but we can't be bothered advertising them'. Tom highlighted the more time consuming process of selling via eBay, while Vicky noted the increased expectation that recipients place on paid-for items, compared with those that are free, and the associated burden for the seller:

> I've been meaning to put a Hoover on eBay for about two years and realised that it would just be so much easier– rather than having to bother getting a photo and putting it on eBay, it'd just be easier to go on Freecycle knowing it would be gone within a minute. And I did have about 20 texts in five minutes. (Tom)

> I have had stuff I've sold on eBay in the past and I've been very honest and said oh it's got a small hole or whatever so I'm just selling it for a couple of quid, you know, and then the person's got it and gone 'ooh it's got a hole in it, I want my money back'. And the way eBay works that's what you have to do, so I'm just like not really a fan of eBay. It's a pain in the bum, you know. (Vicky)

In the above examples, the money that might be gained by selling goods was outweighed by the associated cost, that is, the effort and time commitment involved in doing so. Others, by contrast, emphasised financial considerations. If an object they no longer wanted was seen, nevertheless, to have some remaining financial value – a judgement made by taking into account factors such as its age, condition, price when new, and so on – then it was considered worth at least trying to sell it for money:

> You know, we sold stuff that was obviously of value, for mum, but an immense amount of stuff we gave away. (Beverly)

> If it was something that I personally had paid a lot of money for, I'd probably try and resell it, if it had any value. (Gabriella)

Subsequently, if an item failed to sell, they might then turn to the next best option in the continuum, giving it away for free:

> And what I do is, if things don't sell on eBay I'll Freecycle them, so you know they just get downgraded to the next level. (Anita)

Messy engagements with money

Although the freeness of free online reuse networks was part of their appeal, facilitating exchange of items judged to have little or no resale value, numerous participants agreed that in certain circumstances it made sense to (attempt to) sell items via other second hand channels for money. Taken on face value this suggests the continued importance of money and of monetary valuations of things, even amongst those highly active in non-monetary economies. However, closer examination reveals a complexity to participants' relationship with money

that was qualified, context-specific and rarely straightforwardly about maximising utility.

First, where money was the primary motivation people sold things because they needed (or would greatly appreciate) the extra resource, rather than simply because the opportunity to make money presented itself. Amy, who had moved from the north of England to a comparatively expensive southern city, noted a corresponding increase in how often she would choose to sell rather than give things away. Before moving she had considered selling some of her furniture, eventually deciding to give it for free, partly because she liked the idea of it making somebody else happy:

> I had like a big leather sofa that we put on to sell, and then I just– it wasn't really selling and I thought– I don't know; I just thought this would make somebody really happy to get this stuff through Freecycle … I think it was something like 3000 pounds when it was new, but our cats had scratched all the arms, so we could have sold it for maybe 20 quid. But yeah, it went to a young boy with learning difficulties who was just moving into his first flat … and, you know, he was thrilled to have this big leather sofa. (Amy)

Since moving she found that she would be more inclined to sell things, 'just cos the cost of living is higher'. Similarly, Anita, as seen in Chapter 7, described her income as being 'wiped out' by childcare costs, leaving her and her family with little to spare and making reuse networks a necessity for getting children's clothes and toys. She too noted that in these circumstances she was more likely than usual to sell things she no longer needed, as opposed to giving them away for free: 'as our money situation has got increasingly worse, we Freecycle less, obviously'. The implication in both these cases is that the decision to sell was influenced not only by the going market rate of the good to be passed on, but also, and more importantly, by the extent to which that amount of money – and the psychological experience of being financially prudent – was worth to the would-be seller in the particular sociospatial context she found herself in.

Second, choosing between monetary and non-monetary channels for getting rid of things reflected the participant's history with the object in question, especially how they had acquired it in the first place and the use they had since made of it.

In an earlier example, Gabriella explained how she would try to resell things that she felt had financial value, *if* it was something she 'personally had paid a lot of money for'. This was framed much more as an emotionally-charged decision than a classically calculative one, driven by a mixture of disappointment and embarrassment at having wasted money on an ultimately unwanted item:

> I don't know why, but it would kind of make me feel stupid for having bought [it] if I just gave it away. I usually do that with things that I paid a lot of money for. (Gabriella)

In a parallel situation, when clearing a house of things a previous tenant had left behind, she 'had absolutely no intention of making any money out of it'. Likewise, it made sense to Amy to give away her furniture 'cos it was all second hand anyway'. Sally felt strongly that if she had been given something for free, she would pass it on in the same way when she was finished with it:

> If I get something off Freecycle, … if I don't need that thing anymore, I wouldn't dream of asking for money. That would be given on because it was given to me, and the person that I give it to would be of the same agreement. I just wouldn't dream of asking for money. (Sally)

Third, in some cases the decision to sell or to give for free depended on the relationship between the parties involved. As Sally continued to explain:

> Well I never ask for money, anyway, for anything for any of my friends, and I don't expect them to ask for money if I want something of theirs that they're willing to give away. So that's the agreement, you know. (Sally)

Moreover, as Anita recounted, it was even possible for the nature and terms of an exchange to mutate partway through. In this instance, what was intended to be a sale turned into a gift as the transaction unfolded, again due to the existing connection between the people concerned:

> Some things you end up kind of Freecycling them in an informal way, like for instance I had a baby walker and it was on Friday Ad, and a woman came round and I recognised her. She lives down the road. And I said well just take it, you know. Don't worry about it. (Anita)

Fourth, there was some, albeit tentative, evidence that money merely moved back and forth between the same set of actors in specific subsections of the

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second hand economy – notably in the exchange of children's clothes and toys where goods were acquired, used, and quickly given away again – with little connection to earnings or spending on other goods. Karen alluded to this when she explained that, rather than give her children's old things away via Freecycle, she preferred to sell them at car boot sales 'because it makes a little bit of money to replace the toys or the books or whatever that the children have grown out of'. For Anita, the money made and spent in the selling and buying of children's items was, from her perspective, entirely virtual, and could be just as accurately characterised as a token or credit:

> Anita: But eBay is really a form of Freecycle because it's credit. I sell my children's things and then I can buy them clothes and it's a kind of zero money.
>
> MF: In a Paypal account?
>
> Anita: Exactly.
>
> MF: So you never actually see it as money?
>
> Anita: No, I never take money out of eBay; I use it to sell and buy what we need. Particularly when you're kind of processing things for the kids. (Anita)

Finally, selling things could be fun, even exciting. For Sandra, putting her old things up for sale on eBay, or taking them to a car boot sale, was primarily a 'hobby', a term she had earlier used to describe her engagement in free online reuse, rather than a way to make money. Crucially there was a distinction between selling for the enjoyment of it and selling for profit, something which for her would hold no interest:

> There's something very sort of primitive and elemental about it. Being at a car boot sale and selling a bit of old stuff for 50p is, you know, market forces in its element. It's like going back many thousands of years to early human societies and that sort of thing. I much more enjoy selling a piece of old stuff that I've had for ages for 50p than I would enjoy being a city trader and sitting at a computer selling billions, you know, commodities for millions of pounds. (Sandra)

8.3 Value and values

A recurring theme in participants' accounts of engagement in reclamation practices was how they categorised things and courses of action as more or less worthwhile, and how this related to their navigation of different ways of consuming. Multiple schemes of valuation were at play, often simultaneously and sometimes conflictually.

Attributing worth to things

Participants explained how they put a value on things: the criteria that they considered important in judging the worth of an object and how to act in respect to it. In many cases this related to, in Alice's terms, 'how well it's made', an indicator of the item's 'quality' and 'longevity', or how successfully it will do its job and for how long it will continue to do so. Vicky agreed. For her, being well constructed was, as a rule of thumb, inversely related to how recently something was made. Compared with today's 'mass produced crap', which she associated with major flat pack furniture retailers and cheap high street clothes shops, to give two examples, things used to be 'made better':

> You can get an old table that's like really, really good quality, and that's why it's still really good. And would an Ikea table still be good in 20 years' time?

> Being second hand and being older, it's probably better quality, you know … I mean I kinda take the attitude, err, with clothes for example, I will buy good quality second hand clothes, rather than cheap, badly made clothes. (Vicky)

It often made sense for participants to explain the attributes they valued as a function of those they did not. Emily preferred to spend money and invest in 'quality' rather than repeatedly responding to what was fashionable at any particular time:

> I had stuff tailor made for me, which cost me a bit more, but it was more about style and substance and quality and making it last than it was about throwaway fashion and that I think is quite important. (Emily)

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Some participants emphasised functionality over aesthetic considerations, for instance in the appearance of their homes:

> Furniture is all mismatched … all the plates and cups and things, nothing matches cos it doesn't matter. It's not important. The important thing is that, you know, we have a plate to eat off of. (Karen)

> I don't throw things away until, you know, they're really, really bad … I see people around me … completely redoing their kitchen, and that just– I don't understand that. Erm, so I do redecorate from time to time, but I'm quite happy to have things that are a little bit out of date. (Andrew)

However, the relationship between form and function was not quite as unidirectional as these quotes might suggest when taken on their own. Naomi described a complicated emotional engagement with how she furnished her home, in the context of having a young child. She chose 'less smart' furniture because she was aware just how much value she placed on its appearance:

> I didn't really want to get new things because I'm a bit funny. If I have something new I want to look after it, but you can't really enforce that on a child very easily. They're gonna scratch things.

> I know if it was new I would be an absolute tyrant. I don't necessarily want to be that tyrant … so, you know, rather than put myself in that situation I know I'm going to find really hard to resist, just remove that potential of getting stressed about it really. (Naomi)

Others expressed their appreciation of style, but distanced this from the fashion industry, expensive labels or current trends in design:

> I guess my house doesn't look like a Vogue Living spread, you know; it's more like Bohemian Rhapsody. But as it happens I kind of like that look anyway and I don't really like sterile, really preconceived interior design anyway. (Mel)

> I've always struggled to get my head round why one thing is worth something and one thing is worth something else, down to a stamp or a label. I can't make myself like something because it's got the right label on. I like it or I don't like it. And it might be a thousand pounds or it might be 50p. My value is on how much I think it's worth. (Alice)

Relatedly, something being seen to be rare or unusual was regarded positively as another marker of value, associated with assembling an 'individual' style and again contrasted with following mainstream fashion:

> It was a fun thing and just seeing what you could get. Kind of like when you go charity shop shopping and you get something that no-one else has got. (Sophie)

The above examples are not exhaustive but give an idea of the range of characteristics contributing to an assessment of a given item's worth: build quality, functionality, style and rarity. While these might be qualities of categories of things – second hand furniture, tailor-made clothes – participants also appreciated attributes of particular, singular objects. Some, when acquiring something second hand, enjoyed musing on its 'story' or 'history', who had used it before and what role it had played in their lives and relationships; Alice contrasted this with buying something new and 'soulless'. When getting rid of things this sense of history was expressed as sentimental value or, as Sandra put it, the way that objects 'become part of us'. It was important to be able to imagine recipients treasuring and enjoying the item in a similar way, continuing the story:

> And then stuff that had come to me when we were first setting up, like a futon that I'd got through Freecycle. It had been so useful as a spare bed and … that was when me and Ian were in our first house we got that. And then it went to a couple that were just moving into their first house together and it's nice to sort of see that chain of events really. (Amy)

Food, by its nature comparatively ephemeral, was valued differently still. As already detailed in Chapter 7, urban fruit harvesters prized the fruit they picked largely for its capacity to be enjoyed in the moment – specifically its freshness, ripeness and the diversity of different flavours found – as well as its nutritional value when used to feed people in need. Aesthetic considerations were also highlighted in relation to food acquired through skipping, especially the enjoyment of 'treats' that participants would not normally buy for ethical or financial reasons. They were, however, more likely to express concerns with nutritional qualities in relation to their own personal consumption than was the case in discussions of fruit harvesting, especially when food from bins

constituted a large proportion of their diet. Paul was satisfied that he and his partner lived 'absolutely adequate and healthy lives by just using food that's thrown away'. Tom was similarly positive but recalled times when he 'wouldn't eat very well' due to the limited variety available and contingency of what was thrown away.

Participants made further sense of value by comparing their own valuations with those apparently ascribed by the market. Some noted discrepancies, questioning the adequacy of monetary value as an indicator of worth. Faye felt that certain goods – specifically milk and mobile electronic devices – were undervalued by the market, their price not being a true reflection of the work going into producing them and failing to account for externalities such as social and environmental costs. Alice, on the other hand, lamented the inflated prices of cheaply produced commodities:

> I couldn't bring myself to pay the money that they're charging for the tat that they're producing. It's ridiculous … I think it was like £30 for a set of four plastic drawers ... For that much money I would expect to go to like a second hand furniture place and get a set of real wood drawers. (Alice)

In one case, monetary value was even seen as inversely related to 'actual' value, or the extent to which something fulfils the function for which it was intended:

> And my bike is lots of rescued parts of bikes that I cleaned and put together into a whole bike, and will try and finish to a standard that looks functional but scruffy, on purpose … so less stealable. So if it has a lower resale value it has a higher actual value because it's more likely to be there when you're on your way home. There's an exact example. So my friend who has like a thousand pound fancy shiny road bike that could be sold for a great value, his bike is much more likely to be nicked than my bike, which makes it much less valuable than my bike, in my opinion. (Simon)

In other instances, things that were deemed to be financially valuable continued to be in high demand when made available via alternative, non-monetary channels. When giving away via reuse networks, certain items seemed to attract more interest than others, for instance when Paul offered a car it

prompted an 'absolute plethora of responses'. The continued importance of monetary value might reflect an association between expense, reputation and quality, like when Vicky got a barely used piece of furniture via a reuse network, originally bought from an upmarket department store: 'you know, brand new from John Lewis; that sounds great'. Alternatively getting something considered to be of significant monetary value might also heighten the thrill of finding a bargain. Katy described the sense of 'victory' when discovering an unspoilt bottle of wine in a supermarket bin: 'Ha! They've thrown this bottle of wine away. Yes! We've got some wine from Sainsbury's'.

Differing valuations

Second, as some of the above examples have begun to suggest, there was widespread acknowledgement that different people value the same things differently and, on a related note, that a given person or set of people might experience changes in their valuing particular properties of things over time. Indeed, some combination of these two overlapping ideas was generally agreed to be the raison d'être of reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping, that one person's rubbish could be another person's treasure.

Typically, objects exchanged through free online reuse groups had ceased to be useful to the person giving them away or were taking up much needed space; their value to their owners had decreased, sometimes into negative figures. Simultaneously the same objects were valued (comparatively) highly by recipients, whether an item they had actively sought for a long time or something that had attracted their attention when browsing their online messages. Participants were often surprised by the scale of this disparity in valuations, both when other people wanted things they would regard as worthless and when people were getting rid of things that they valued:

> It's amazing what people throw out. It never ceases to amaze me.
> You know, perfectly practical useful things. (Fraser)

Fruit harvesters observed major differences between the value they placed on the produce they collected and what various others thought about it: tree owners, people they tried to give free fruit to and, by extension, society at large. It was standard practice to offer first choice of the harvested fruit to the people

whose garden it came from, but in many cases they did not want any. In some instances this was because they had already helped themselves to some of the fruit and had had their fill. In other cases, however, they had no interest in eating what was growing on their land:

> They were like 'yeah, yeah of course; take all our apples, take all our apples' and we picked them and they were like 'no, no; of course we don't want any of those, we don't want any'. And they were just– I don't know why, they just thought they were like not very nice. (Katy)

There were different explanations for this reluctance to eat free fruit. Some pointed to its imperfect cosmetic appearance, relative to what is sold in supermarkets:

> The fruit on a tree in the back garden isn't bright and polished and look like perfect, like on the supermarket shelf, which is how people perceive this is what fruit should be. (Margaret)

Similarly, when trying to give away fruit to members of the public:

> Some people were quite wary of them. They were just like 'oh well, they look a bit weird' and some people were just like 'oh they look minging; I don't want one of those; I'm gonna go and buy one'. So it was like people didn't really attach a value to them because they weren't buying them and because they didn't look supermarkety. They were kind of small or they might … have kind of skin blobs, or I don't know. (Katy)

Participants also highlighted perceived hygiene concerns: fruit from a garden, as opposed to fruit on sale in a shop, was considered by some people they had encountered to be unclean, or even potentially harmful:

> There seems to be a lot of … belief that if it doesn't come from the supermarket it's not safe. (Andrew)

> Again, if you've grown up buying the apples from the supermarket it's trusted. It's a trusted source; it's wrapped in polystyrene; it's clean. (Marie)

More broadly, these concerns over appearance or cleanliness were contextualised within an apparent cultural disconnect between food and where it comes from. The way people valued or devalued fruit was tied up with the economics and politics of agriculture and retail, as well as being in large part

informed by their routine provisioning practices. Fruit on a supermarket shelf was meaningfully associated with the category 'food' in a way that plants growing in a garden were not:

> A lot of people, they say 'I don't like them; I get my fruit from the supermarket' ... I don't know. They just find it weird that it's coming from a tree or something. (Stu)

> I think it's kind of alien to people because they're not brought up to think of food being accessible. (Marie)

> People just don't think of eating things that are growing. So, you know, there is a disconnection between food and nature. And just going to the supermarket: that's normal. (Andrew)

Discussion of skipping brought up similar issues. Food was thrown away by retailers because it had lost its exchange value, or at least this had fallen low enough to no longer be worth taking up shelf space that more profitable goods could occupy. The reasons for this were varied but might include damage to packaging, damage to one unit within a pack – for example eggs: 'one egg gets smashed; the other eggs get a bit of egg on; the box gets ruined' (Tom) – or, probably most commonly, passing a sell-by date, the point at which food products become classified as no longer fit to buy, however much aesthetic and nutritional value they may still hold.

Participants who went skipping described some of the reactions they had encountered when talking with non-skippers. These often echoed the experiences of urban fruit harvesters in that goods which were considered 'food' while on a supermarket shelf, and still were when moved to a 'reduced to clear' counter, lost the association with this category at precisely the point they were thrown away. One assumption was that food would only be discarded if it was inedible, that is, the stuff skippers were finding in bins was not really food anymore and might even be unsafe to eat:

> They assume that stuff that's being thrown away is not fit for eating, because it's been thrown away. Not that it's just older than the latest stuff they've got in so they've got rid of it, or it's past its best before date. (Alice)

Another assumption they came across was that food became contaminated in some way – becoming 'dirty' (Simon) or 'disgusting' (Gabriella) – by being placed in a bin, or being in close contact with other things in that bin. When the topic came up in other interviews, with those primarily engaged in fruit harvesting or online reuse, some participants who had heard of skipping but had never done it themselves shared these fears:

> I quite happily buy stuff that's on the shelf in the supermarket that's going out of date, or has just gone out of date, erm, but no I wouldn't [go skipping]. I wouldn't feed it to my kids cos I'd want to be sure that it was safe to eat. (Karen)

> I think it's pretty disgusting actually. You don't know where it's been or what's happened to it, you know. I suppose if things are totally sealed up they might be alright. (Sandra)

Skippers meanwhile salvaged discarded food because to them it still had value: they could eat it both for enjoyment and nourishment. A typical assessment was that much of this food was still 'perfectly alright' (Paul) and they were quick to counter any claims about its poor condition or the cleanliness of sourcing it from a bin:

> Nothing's ever been off really. It's always tasted absolutely fine. (Emily)

> When I started doing it I realised that so much of skipping can be very sanitary. It can be a very sanitary experience because they go round, they go round the shop and they put things into big bags, tie them up and put them in a bin. And actually quite a lot of skipping can be taking a clean bag out of a reasonably clean bin, opening the bag and everything being perfectly good inside. (Tom)

Different values and different actions

Participants also gave examples of how they acted differently with respect to differently valued things. When choosing the most appropriate means for giving things away, as already seen, the item's expected financial value and perceptions as to its quality and condition were important factors in determining which of a number of monetary and non-monetary conduits to use. Even within online reuse there were differences in how the practice was performed which reflected givers' and recipients' valuations of the goods involved. This is best

illustrated by looking at how people adopted different approaches to giving things away according to what those things meant to them. Items with more of an emotional connection, with some history or those that were seen as having more monetary or useful value, were carefully directed to other participants. As shown in Chapter 6, the means of choosing the appropriate person varied, but might involve considering the degree to which the giver identified with a prospective recipient, their demonstration of need or a description of how they would use the object. Faye described giving away a musical instrument to which she had grown a strong 'sentimental attachment'. Eventually she passed it on to a woman who intended to give it to her father as a present:

> I put the condition on giving the flute that it couldn't be sold … I don't actually mind somebody doing that if that's what they need to do, but because of the sentimental attachment to it as a musical instrument and because of its value as metal, of melting it down, I wanted it to be a present from a daughter to a father, not then for the father to go and [sell it]. (Faye)

For other items, giving via reuse networks was a way to get rid of something unwanted, that was a burden or taking up space. In such cases, givers were often happy to give to the first person that expressed interest:

> You even get some people sending out emails saying 'I have just cleared out all this stuff; it is in my garden; come and get it now before the rain comes'. They're not even gonna choose, they're just putting the email out. 'Take it, I want it gone'. (Vicky)

These items might be seen simply as 'junk', as no longer of value. Alternatively a process of detachment might have already taken place, as Vicky went on to elaborate:

> I've come to the decision that I can accept that this stuff can now go, so I want it gone before I change my mind. And also it's like once you view the stuff differently, it's not personal, it hasn't got an attachment. It's then rubbish. (Vicky)

Treating things differently according to their value was not limited to exchanging second hand goods. Fruit harvesters graded apples and pears according to their appearance and condition. Different grades of fruit were then allocated to

different purposes: to be given out and eaten as pieces of fruit, to be made into juice or cider, to be used as an ingredient in preserve-making workshops, or to be composted. While there were differences in application, classification of fruit tended to closely follow the guidelines given in the *Abundance Handbook*. Skippers also had to exercise discernment. Free food was not always ascribed sufficient value to be worth taking. Some of the food in the bin was considered too messy, or too old, or too contaminated by other products:

> But then there's everything from [clean bags of food] to kind of peeling a lettuce off the bottom of a bin that's covered in chicken juice. So, you know, that's grotesque. And in between is stuff like within the bag you'll have had a broken yoghurt or cream and it'll have just gone everywhere, and have worked its way around all the packaging, but can be washed off, even if it's a bit greasy. (Tom)

Sophie noted how she was sometimes disappointed with the quality or condition of what she had collected, after further inspection on returning home. Part of becoming a skilled practitioner of skipping, then, was learning to judge which things were worth salvaging and which were not. Furthermore, this judgement of value and the response to it was fluid, shifting over time, reflecting repeated exposure or changing circumstances:

> You do kind of get more liberal as time goes on. Like you start taking things that are more and more out of date. (Stu)

> You have to decide how far you're willing to go. In terms of how desperate you are to save something that's wasted, that's going to be wasted. Yeah and that probably varies a bit on how much is there and how much you need stuff. (Tom)

Time and experiences

While conversations were centred on exchanges of material things, participants also talked about valuing intangibles, such as time or experiences, and crucially how these valuations interacted with their consumption choices. For some this helped explain why getting things for free was a major motivation for their use of alternative channels, again suggesting that the importance of money, and saving it, should be interpreted in a qualified way.

A common story was of people choosing to work fewer hours, or in a less demanding job, so that they could spend more time with family or doing other activities that they saw as worthwhile. A combined strategy of reducing consumption and trying to source things as cheaply as possible was seen as a way of facilitating this wider choice. Faye, for example, worked as many hours as she felt she needed to, but no more:

> I'm self-employed so the money I spend, I see it in terms of hours I have to work and pay tax on. And I can actually work part-time … and I really value that. (Faye)

Instead she prioritised time to talk to people, to reflect and to work on art projects. She enjoyed these experiences and was reluctant to 'pay the personal price' to have more money to spend on things:

> I'm actually very happy. And spent four hours today absolutely engrossed in doing this wood cut from a piece of plywood that I got from a building site skip. (Faye)

Pat saw the opportunity to do more voluntary work and to spend time with her husband as more valuable than the additional income – over and above what she needed to get by – that she could earn through working full-time. And for Karen the priority was to spend more time with her children:

> 25 years ago I decided that life was about a lot more than money, and my husband had taken early retirement, and I thought, you know, I've never valued money. It's never been a major driver anyway and I can get by on three days a week. And that gave me two days free to do what I wanted, which was a lot more volunteer work. So I'd say that's as valuable as my mainstream job. (Pat)

> The less I have to pay, the less I have to work, the more time I have with the kids. (Karen)

The above examples all refer to deprioritising money and expensive things, to allow time for the enjoyment of other types of activities. Other participants talked about how they allocated money, sometimes significant amounts, in order to prioritise the experiences that they valued. Both Vicky and Mel highlighted the enjoyment of food, while clearly an embodied and material act, as something distinct from, and worth more to them than, accumulating goods:

> I won't spend money on things, but I do like nice food … I might spend 40 quid, which is a hell of a lot of money to me, but to me that's a really good experience and a nice memory and I will enjoy it and I appreciate good food. So I have things that I like to spend money on and experiences that I like, but it's not *things*, do you know what I mean? (Vicky)

> I just don't like spending lots of money on things. I'd rather spend money on experiences or buying a higher quality food … You know, we need money so that we can do good things or eat nice food but not buy more stuff. (Mel)

A recurring theme in participants' accounts of their valuations of time and experiences was that, once again, this was in contrast to (at least some) other people they came into contact with. Faye recalled a recent conversation while waiting in a queue:

> There was a man in front of me who was basically whinging and trying to get other people to whinge for him, and I said 'excuse me, I don't agree with you'. I said 'actually in my normal life I don't get to spend an hour doing nothing. I am actually enjoying this queue because I get to do nothing'. (Faye)

Alice gave an example from closer to home, explaining how her two sisters' relationships with work, time and money differed starkly from her own:

> They're much more happy to spend a lot of money on something that I wouldn't decide to spend money on. It's not necessarily that they've got more money than me either; I think it's just that they're– they're both very busy people … they work really hard and they earn money, so then they go and spend it. (Alice)

Although this appears to be a radically different orientation to the work-life balance to that described by Faye, Pat, Karen and Simon above, it is worth noting that it is still underpinned by 'valuing time', as Alice noted. For her sisters, time was precious precisely because they had so little of it. Searching for bargains, reclaiming, repairing and repurposing things took time and energy, two resources in short supply for people working long hours, as she remembered from her previous job before becoming self-employed. Conversely, Stu reflected on how his own consumption habits had changed since beginning

a full-time job; convenience was worth paying a premium for when time was limited:

> It's the convenience isn't it? It's like when things are really convenient it's like yeah, it's worth spending a bit of money on that. (Stu)

More broadly, prioritising time and experiences over work and spending was seen as different from, and posing a challenge to, prevailing societal valuations of their respective worth. Andrew and Faye gave familiar critical depictions of consumerism, promising happiness to those willing to work more and buy more, but ultimately failing to deliver it:

> I don't think consumerism makes people happy … I think it's making people unhappier … I think it is, you know, a sort of treadmill of, erm, looking for status and keeping up with other people and I don't think it– I don't think it works really. So yeah I'm a bit sort of exploring alternatives in work and consumption. (Andrew)

> I call it McDream … it's not the Volvo now; it's the Prius or the Audi. Everything is new; everything is matching. You have the Apple family … I think that having proved to myself that I can be part of that world, I can do that. Do I want to pay the personal price for doing that? The answer's no. (Faye)

Ethical values

Many made reference, explicitly or implicitly, to ethical values, implying some sort of code or framework against which they considered the desirability of a course of action, and especially in relation to their concern for the welfare of human and nonhuman others. As shown in Chapter 7, participants frequently described particular relationships or circumstances as being to a greater or lesser degree right or wrong, fair or unfair. They spoke about wanting to live with integrity, in keeping with a set of principles. Even when not directly using these terms they strongly alluded to some categorisation of the relative moral worth of their consumption choices, referring to the embedded harmful consequences for people or the environment, or speculating as to their positive change-oriented potential.

Attempting to live consistently with a set of principles – whatever that looked like – sometimes meant compromise, especially while also valuing convenience,

enjoyment and good quality things, and remaining within the confines of a budget. Participants often alluded to a need to balance these (at times) competing demands, to decide in particular circumstances which to prioritise. Mel put this ongoing negotiation in explicitly cost-benefit terms, seeing it in terms of a 'triple bottom line':

> You know, capitalism works on a single bottom line which is money, and the triple bottom line is social, economic and environmental. So those three things, if they're in balance with whatever we do, it would just be a fairer, nicer place to live, and it wouldn't be such a drag on the future, you know. (Mel)

Finding such equilibrium was, in practice, an imprecise and imperfect art, at times a source of anxiety or frustration. I now turn to participants' experiences of pursuing this balance: living in, managing and only sometimes resolving the tensions thrown up in the process.

8.4 Managing tensions

A final point to make about how participants negotiated consumption choices is how the multiple criteria of worth described above often interacted with each other. The emphasis in interviews was on when these different priorities collided in virtuous ways through reclamation practices, on the 'win-win' situation of simultaneously saving money, reducing waste, helping somebody else, conveniently disposing of things, and so on:

> Well, it's helping everybody, all ways round. Because it's helping me to get whatever it is that I want, without having to go out and buy it … It's helping the people who don't want it to get rid of it … It's saving landfill; it's not filling all your tips up and causing pollution and everything. So really I can't see anything bad in it. All I can see is good things all the way round for everybody concerned. (Gemma)

However, there were also instances when different types of value and values came into conflict with each other, not always in easily resolvable ways. A common tension was between managing financial resources and making ethically preferable decisions. Vicky, for example, felt it was important to 'try to support small businesses', but in reality did so 'not half as much as I would like, because they do tend to be more expensive'. Amy described how she would try

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to buy organic food and ecologically friendly cleaning products, but was unable when money was tight: 'sometimes it's just not possible because, you know, I need to go down to Savers and get washing powder for a pound'. Her ability to afford the things she preferred depended not just on her own finances but also on broader economic trends leading to fluctuations in prices. Perhaps counterintuitively, she felt recent increases in the overall cost of living had made her more likely to do so:

> It's almost easier to do that at the moment because the supermarket prices are so high just now … There used to be such a big difference between supermarkets and like health food shops, and now it's not such a big gap, so it's a bit easier to go there and spend that money. (Amy)

Amy's example suggests fluidity to how competing priorities were managed. She did not speak in terms of absolutes: saving money did not always take precedence over environmental concerns, but it did when money was in particularly short supply.

Like Vicky and Amy, Paul also noted the expense of shopping 'ethically', but there was a subtly different emphasis to his objection. There was a level of cost (not specified) which he would not go beyond in order to buy goods certified as fair trade. Although this appears, at first glance, to be a tension between money and social concerns, closer inspection suggests it to be more an issue of competing principles. While his preference was to buy from companies that paid production workers fairly, he felt sceptical about the marketing of their products as premium goods or markers of status, conflicting with his desire to live simply and frugally:

> I find myself gibbering at the extra price … I'm sometimes conscious I'm buying in, like I don't want to be bought by some clever little bit of advertising, even if it is a little fair trade logo. So I'm a little bit resistant to buying something because it's supposedly ethical, or it's got green packaging or something. (Paul)

Paul was not the only participant to talk about different ethical considerations coming into conflict. For some it was straightforward to prioritise one value over another. Tom said he was 'more passionate about human suffering than the

environment', although he acknowledged the connections between the two. Others found it more difficult to choose between multiple concerns. Trish talked about a 'daily battle' deciding how to best prioritise her time and which causes to support. Sophie recounted a particular dilemma in detail. She was trying to buy dairy products in a manner consistent with her concern for animal welfare, but not wishing to support certain brands and while also sticking to a budget:

> If I'm to drink yoghurt or milk I wouldn't go to Aldi to do it. I would feel like I'm contributing to some thing's … pain so I wouldn't do that … I would actually rather go to Waitrose and buy organic. Even if I'm buying Prince Charles's milk, I'd rather do that than go to Aldi. (Sophie)

Even when avoiding cow's milk altogether, the decision remained complex. Animal welfare concerns were replaced with environmental ones, especially the carbon implications of growing and transporting goods from overseas, while price remained in view:

> We had a bit of a complicated thing about soya milk and hemp milk, which we didn't talk about too much. Hemp milk's like twice as much as soya milk. Soya milk's from the other side of the world. Hemp milk's from England. It was complicated wasn't it? (Sophie)

Participants were also prepared to compromise on ethical principles if there was something they had a particular need for and would struggle to source in other, more preferable ways. As discussed in the first part of Section 4, skippers (like Paul) were often 'reluctant' to buy food from supermarkets on ethical grounds, but did so on the basis of how much they felt they needed the item in question. Again, the nature of this judgement was fluid, varying according to circumstances:

> We don't have many absolutes in that field. We're uncomfortable with large corporations, just on principle, but I think … we vary depending on how much the need is … We could say 'right okay we wouldn't use Tesco' [but] we do, even though we object to their principles. But I think what we'd want to do is shop as little as we can. (Paul)

Vicky, meanwhile, described a similar compromise, this time with respect not only to ethical values but also to her valuing of things being well made, as detailed earlier:

> I said like I try not to buy cheap mass produced stuff, but I do buy my children– well, I can't always get everything I need second hand, so I will buy them clothes at Primark. (Vicky)

Finally, there were differences in the subjective experience of decision making in light of having multiple competing claims as to the right or best course of action in any given situation. Sophie found it, in her own words, 'quite stressful'. She was hyperaware of the potential consequences of each consumption choice and, as mentioned in Section 7.2, saw skipping as 'freeing' her from this burden. Katy agreed:

> As soon as you start thinking about one thing, like the consequences of every tiny thing that you do, it's like it just opens up such a big thing, so many dilemmas about every tiny thing … I do end up like in the supermarket or something just like paralysed by like the choice of just like 'Oh my god; how do I weigh this up? What do I do?' Cos you've kind of opened your eyes to it and it's really hard to make decisions. (Katy)

Paul, by contrast, was aware of, but more comfortable living in this tension: 'there's a hypocrisy that's always lurking and I sort of tend to smile at myself for it basically; I don't feel too hung up about it'.

8.5 Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to consider how participants navigate between multiple choices on a day-to-day basis; why, in any given situation, they acquire or dispose via a particular conduit, rather than the other options available. First, participants used multiple channels on an ongoing basis, within and outside the formal monetary economy. Even when striving to avoid certain businesses and products, they were not 'rigid', exercising continual discernment – taking into account convenience, availability and how much something was needed or wanted – over where to source things. When passing things on they sometimes preferred to sell them for money. However, this was far from straightforwardly about utility maximisation. Second, participants negotiated multiple judgements of worth when choosing between potential courses of action. They acted differently with respect to differently valued objects and their valuations were, at times, at odds with those of others around them. Finally,

navigating between conduits brought to the fore contradictions between different valuations. Managing these tensions was an ongoing and imperfect undertaking, not easily resolved.

I return to the significance and implications of these findings, both for academic understanding and real-world application, in Chapter 10. Before doing so, in the following chapter I turn attention to another important, and under-researched, aspect of the lives of practitioners: how they, over the course of their lives, came to engage in particular ways of consuming, how new practices are adopted and how this engagement is sustained, becoming part of normal everyday life.

Chapter nine: becoming practitioners of alternative economies

9.1 Introduction

As highlighted in Chapter 3, existing research has paid relatively little attention to the processes by which people come to be engaged in reclamation practices, giving much greater emphasis to their motivations. Wittingly or otherwise, this reproduces the prevailing assumption that behaviour arises from conscious deliberation and that behaviour change is straightforwardly the result of improving people's knowledge and/or appealing to their attitudes. To redress this balance, and following the lead of practice-oriented research in other contexts (see Chapter 4) I concentrate in this chapter on *how* research participants became engaged in reclamation practices, how this engagement was sustained or how it receded. I pay particular attention to the role of social networks and interpersonal relations in facilitating these processes, a recurring theme in my interviews.

In Section 9.2 I underline the importance of continuity, exploring participants' apparent predisposition to adopt particular new practices on the basis of their upbringing and their previous and existing involvement in related practices. In Section 9.3, by contrast, I consider some of the ways this continuity was disrupted, bringing a range of other practices into contention. I then turn to the role of social networks in recruitment to practices, from participants' perspectives as both recruits and recruiters (Section 9.4), before looking at the processes by which newly adopted practices gradually become integrated into normal life (Section 9.5). Finally, in Section 9.6, I return to discussing the relationship between value(s) and practices, as begun in Chapter 8, to uncover how participants came to value things and experiences in different ways through their engagement in reclamation practices.

9.2 Upbringing and continuity between practices

Most research participants talked about their engagement in alternative consumption practices as a continuation or development of activities they had previously engaged in, or as stemming from longstanding values or beliefs that they felt had been instilled in them. In other words they were to some extent

predisposed to consuming in particular ways. Many attributed this to their upbringing and especially to relationships with immediate family members. For some this meant a reaction against or rejection of what they had observed and done as children, but more typically participants saw continuity between childhood and their adult lives.

While there is a common thread in these accounts of upbringing – as Sally put it, 'I was brought up to not waste' – what is striking is the variety of experiences and the nuanced understandings of precisely what values or dispositions were gained in childhood, paralleling the range of different narratives mobilised by participants in explaining their motivations, as explored in Chapter 7.

Thrift, frugality and the value of things

Often notions of thrift or frugality (or a combination of the two) were central, both reflecting concerns with 'saving' as opposed to 'squandering'. Following Evans's (2011b) distinction, thrift relates to the ability to provide for oneself and one's family by the judicious use of resources, whereas frugality implies self-effacement, restraint, deferred gratification and care for relatively distant human and/or nonhuman others. For example:

> My dad was- we were so poor he would save Christmas paper from the year before, opening it very carefully. You weren't allowed to rip your parcels open. (Pat)

> So [my dad] started with almost nothing and I think it's his wanting to be careful with every penny that has somewhat rubbed off. Not totally. But I think that's where some of it comes from … Rather than parking in town and spending a pound he'd, you know, park in the free car park and make us walk half an hour. (Susan)

> We were quite broke… and I've always been quite happy in playing with mud and a stick (laughs), and pussycats, and a pencil and a piece of paper, and my piano, and it's almost like my secret life is enjoying shadows, enjoying the way the doors shut in door frames, real kind of simplicity. (Faye)

As well as suggesting austere financial management, these stories begin to hint at a creative resourcefulness that is, at times, satisfying, enjoyable or even playful as in Faye's case, simultaneously an acknowledgement of scarcity and

an appreciation of abundance. Similarly, Simon was keen to emphasise playfulness as a constant in his childhood and adult life:

> I wasn't interested in like status objects and sort of thing even as a child really. I didn't really join in in the school like wanting things with names on them sort of thing. I just liked playing and building stuff and whatever.

> I'm one of four kids. We did lots of stuff with each other, but also with other people. I've always built treehouses and yeah, just lots of outdoor play, lots of creative play, doing music, doing things like that. (Simon)

Others talked about bargain hunting as a pursuit in its own right, again highlighting pleasurable aspects of money saving practices beyond the narrowly economic. Naomi and Beverly, for instance, both explained their own such enjoyment with reference to that of their parents: Naomi's mother's trips to charity shops to 'hunt for bargains' and Beverly's father's 'eye for a bargain' as an avid collector.

The examples of Faye and Simon above also draw attention to the qualities of things and experiences that were valued by participants and how this became established during formative years. Both suggest other measures of worth taking precedence over monetary value. Expensive toys or 'status objects' were rejected in favour of what were considered simpler, or more creative pleasures. For Faye this was framed partly as a response to need, reflecting a lack of financial means. In other instances, as Vicky recounted, experience and context-specific knowledge were seen as more accurate indicators of value than price or prestige:

> My dad would always take us to eat in the poor areas of London, where I grew up, because that's where you would get the best curries, where the locals ate, you know, rather than some fancy restaurant. (Vicky)

Alternatively, Gabriella described her parents as 'people that would buy new things and invest in something expensive, but they would give a value to the things that they buy and to the things they have in the house'. The implication was that while they might initially spend larger sums of money, this was seen as

an investment in good quality objects that would be taken care of and last, not needing to be quickly replaced.

Early experiences of reclamation

Accounts of upbringing tended to emphasise practical experiences of learning, referring to patterns of seeing and doing, over being instructed and informed. Many gave examples from childhood of routinely reusing things, from saving paper (Pat) and string (Christine), to salvaging and repurposing goods and materials to extend their lives as useful objects. As alluded to in Chapter 7, Alice had learnt these skills from her grandmother, who was 'just really good at thinking of things to do with things', 'able to think about something completely different to do with [a given item] that was really useful'. She also recalled regularly making and altering clothes with her mother and sisters. Emily described her father as being 'very much … into using stuff around him to make things':

> I spent a lot of my childhood running round scrapyards with my dad, finding bits, you know, to take back home and polish up and stick on to engines and all the rest of it. (Emily)

Various experiences of second hand acquisition, or what might now be termed reuse exchange (Gregson et al., 2013), were also common to respondents' accounts of their upbringing, both informally within networks of family, friends and neighbours in the form of 'hand-me-downs' and through broader external channels such as charity shops or 'junk' shops.

By comparison, references to explicitly environmentally conscious activities were rare, perhaps reflecting the era that research participants grew up in and the relatively recent rise to mainstream public consciousness of global issues such as climate change, as well as the late adoption of recycling as a widespread practice in the UK. One exception was Amy, whose father was an early advocate of such activity:

> My dad was really quite sort of ahead of the game with things like recycling because he always, like, we always recycled as kids. We split our newspapers and tins and we had to take them to the recycling bank cos there was no recycling anywhere. (Amy)

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Socialisation in context

This last quote highlights awareness not only of the direct influence of parents, but also of the importance of social, spatial and temporal context: early socialisation does not occur in a vacuum, within a family unit, but is embedded in broader patterns of cultural reproduction. In this instance, Amy's home life was characterised by its otherness to prevailing disposal practices in a particular place and time. Similarly, Anita saw her upbringing as different from, even oppositional to, those around her:

> I grew up in Essex and it was then still quite a blingy culture, but my family used to buy their clothes in the charity shop and I used to get kind of mercilessly teased about it at school, although less so when you go to university. So I think that we've always been like that as a family. (Anita)

While these two examples suggest an experience at odds with others and their surroundings, participants tended to portray context as a more straightforward (positive, although not necessarily welcome) influence on their development. Some referred to the geography of their upbringing. Trish traced the origins of her involvement in urban fruit harvesting to the fact that she had been brought up in a more rural setting, in a village: 'you wouldn't get food being wasted, you know. We had apple trees and we used the fruit'. Several participants had spent their early years outside the UK and were able to reflect on perceived differences between their native culture and that of their adopted home.

Others drew distinctions between when they were children, particularly those growing up in the post-war era, and the present day. Christine, for instance, felt that reusing things as a matter of course had been more 'normal' during her childhood than today:

> I was born just after the war and reuse was just like something my family did. We didn't call it reuse, or we didn't even think about it, because they went through the war – my parents went through the war time – so sharing stuff, like giving all your apples away, or reusing stuff and keeping stuff and making stuff was just like part of our lives really. And as I've got older and older I've just seen the way life's changed and a lot of it's good, I mean a lot of it's for the better, but I can also see how much waste there is. Because I can make the

> comparison between how we used to live. So yeah, just making do and having second hand furniture was just, like, normal. (Christine)

Pat contrasted her own experiences to that of her son's generation, brought up in comparatively more affluent times. In her view, younger people find it more difficult to 'get the environmental message' as they have less direct experience of going without or making do. Alice, however, as part of that younger cohort, noted continuity from her grandparents' generation in spite of changing material circumstances:

> I've had a very middle class upbringing, but … it's only second generation, so it's still within my mum and my dad to be really quite thrifty. And we lived next door to my grandma and my grandpa who had had very difficult lives, obviously living through the wars and stuff like that, so I got a lot of my thriftiness, I got a lot of my reuse ideas and stuff from my grandma really. (Alice)

Participants were clear, then, that socially-, spatially- and temporally-situated upbringing and early relationships to a large extent set the patterns for their own consumption habits in later life. This recalls Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, summarised as 'a system of durable and transposable *dispositions* (schemes of perception, appreciation and action), produced by particular social environments, which functions as the principle of the generation and structuring of practices and representations' (Bourdieu, 1988: 786, original emphasis). However, some spoke of their own patterns of behaviour in opposition to that of their parents. Wendy, now a seasoned reuser, maintained that she 'wasn't brought up like that' and that her early concerns about scarcity of resources had been discouraged as 'silly' by her father. Others, while attributing their aversion to waste to their upbringing, noted that their siblings had followed quite different trajectories after a similar start to life. Both raise the question of what factors other than early familial relationships might contribute to making certain ways of acting 'normal'.

If upbringing was about establishing patterns to work from, participants' accounts suggested continuity in adult life between different but related ways of consuming. Many participants saw taking on new ways of acquiring or disposing not as completely new practices but as developments or adaptations of existing

ways of getting and getting rid, for instance using charity shops or recycling. Often these practices shared elements with the reclaiming activities discussed in the research: meanings around saving money and reducing waste, similar mechanisms for connecting individuals, similar types of goods and skills involved in acquiring and disposing.

9.3 Key moments of disruption

As Section 8.2 has made clear, coming to engage in online reuse, fruit harvesting and skipping was marked by considerable continuity. Participants typically saw these practices as an extension of what they were already doing or had done previously, in many cases the manifestation of dispositions originally developed during childhood and which in turn reflect and reproduce aspects of the historical, geographical, social and cultural context which they have, to varying degrees, absorbed and resisted.

That said, this chapter is primarily concerned with understanding processes of change and instances of *dis*continuity: how (often subtly) different ways of doing things have been adopted and the extent to which they have taken root, becoming part of new patterns of relatively continuous behaviour. Participants described a range of triggers, or disruptive moments, which caused a break in their routines and allowed different way of doing things to become thinkable or doable.

These disruptive moments took numerous forms. At the simplest level they might include finding out some new information: hearing about, or taking notice of, an alternative conduit for the first time. Jane found her local fruit harvesting group by reading an online blog, while Sally spotted an advert in the neighbourhood magazine and Trish remembered signing up at a stall at a local event. Olivia was told about Freecycle by her father, and David by a neighbour, whereas Gemma first heard it mentioned on television. Sophie recalled first hearing about skipping from a specific group of friends, recounting in detail the emotional content of her reaction to it; Stu had a more general recollection that he 'heard rumours of people being able to do it'.

Changing circumstances

Simply discovering and acting on information rarely told the full story. A second important set of ruptures related to a new found, or newly recognised, need to acquire or get rid of particular items, often triggered by a change of circumstances: moving home, changes in work or study, separating from a partner, bereavement. Olivia, for example, moved from Portugal to study in the UK. Before leaving, her father had recommended that she look into Freecycle based on his experience of their local group at home. Initially, on arrival in the UK, she lived in a furnished flat and had little need or capacity for acquiring more things. However it was preparing for a subsequent move to an unfurnished flat that prompted her to make use of online reuse networks.

> So when I moved to the unfurnished flat I pretty much furnished everything from Freegle. If it's not like a hundred per cent, it's 90 plus, honestly. (Olivia)

Olivia talked about the coinciding of a number of factors that allowed this to happen. She was aware of reuse because of her father's recommendation, she needed furniture and other goods to establish her new home, she had limited financial means due to being a full-time student and, expecting to move away again in the future, she did not see furnishing her home as a long term investment, planning to 'put it back' on Freegle or Freecycle at a later date. Her move also occurred at a time of year when she felt more things were available through reuse networks, increasing the chances of her getting everything she needed:

> It happened that I moved in the spring time, so it was like when people are saying 'I'm going to renew and redecorate, so this thing doesn't match with my curtains so I'm going to get rid of it'. It happened to coincide. I didn't choose. It happened to coincide. (Olivia)

Ali also first experienced online reuse when moving home, having seen a leaflet advertising his local group. At the time he was going through what he described as a 'difficult situation', in the process of separating from his wife and 'restarting'. He began using Freegle, initially to 'kit out' the part-furnished local authority property he was moving into.

Others spoke about their first experiences of giving through reuse networks, with changes of circumstance again playing a key role. Kirsty, for instance, had heard about Freecycle 'a few years ago' but then 'forgot about it again'. It reappeared on her 'radar' when trying to get rid of unwanted items during a house move:

> What prompted me to start using Freecycle recently was moving house and having a load of stuff that I wanted to get rid of that I couldn't find homes for. And somehow Freecycle hit my radar at that point and I started using it to dispose of things primarily. (Kirsty)

Beverly became aware of online reuse exchange after her father died, learning that he had been a Freecycle member. As 'such a collector of interesting stuff' he had amassed an assortment of specialist paraphernalia that were of no use to the immediate family, of unknown financial worth and that she felt would be appropriate to give away to people who could make better use of them:

> When Dad died he left a mountain of stuff behind. His little office in the house was just rammed and he had so many interests. He was a photographer; he was an acupuncturist; he was a hypnotherapist; he built computers. So he had books and equipment, all to do with these different interests. And I gave the majority of them away on Freecycle. Some of it in huge lots. So that was probably my first thing that I did with Freecycle. (Beverly)

Changing circumstances were also influential in participants getting involved at a more organisational level. Andrew left his job and had a period without paid work, planning to spend time on a voluntary basis helping establish local community food initiatives:

> So yeah those two things coming together, having the time and wanting– needing something to do, meant I started a group … I met a couple of people that I knew locally so that was helpful to have a couple of people to bounce ideas around. And then putting up leaflets and it grew from there. (Andrew)

Leaving employment, having spare time and 'needing something to do', were common factors for Christine and Mel, each becoming involved in running a local online reuse group after leaving work due to ill health. While their conditions were quite different, both were looking for an activity that would

conveniently fit with their new circumstances, as well as their skills and the things they valued:

> I wanted to find something to get involved in that I could sort of reasonably do mostly from home … So I just thought that sounds really good, cos I wanted to do something that I felt was worth doing. So I thought that just fits in with my life and what I think's worth doing, really. (Christine)

> So I kind of came across online reuse – Freecycle – and I offered to help run the group cos I just knew I'd be stuck at home, and I thought it was something– it was something to distract me … And I ended up in the online thing cos I just knew I was gonna be stuck at home and so it meant I didn't have to go anywhere. I had IT skills so I knew I could just do it. It had flexibility; if I was really sick one day it didn't really matter. (Mel)

Discursive disturbances

As well as changes in practical and material circumstances, some participants spoke of moments of disruption to their thinking: encounters through which their place in the world, particular issues or concerns came into sharper focus, or where normal, routine, unthinking activities became matters to be questioned, reflected upon and talked about. In Wilk's (2009) terms these were experiences of cultivation. Sometimes this was remembered as a thought process, contextualised but unclear what had prompted it. For Paul a particular experience stuck in his head that challenged his perspective on self-reliance and ownership of goods:

> Probably about 10 years ago it just dawned on me how ridiculous it was that I was gonna go to B&Q to sort of buy a drill and there's probably a drill in almost every house in the block sitting there, not being used … so sort of challenged myself whether I'd be ready to lend somebody a drill, … or even the harder thing often, whether you'd be prepared to ask for it. (Paul)

While he could not pinpoint what had caused this moment of realisation – what stopped him from just going to buy the drill and made him reflect – it was an incident that clearly stood out to him as an important marker in telling his story. Others talked about memorable conversations having prompted them to question the existing ways they did things. Pat recalled meeting a woman at a

local event who had managed to reduce her household waste to 'one shopping size plastic bag a week':

> I was astonished at that. Absolutely astonished. And I realised the trouble that she was going to, to try and find a home for absolutely everything that was coming out of her house. So I was most impressed with that. I never managed to achieve it myself but I can see the bin diminishing ever so slightly. (Pat)

Another common way that people described being made to stop and think was through contact with various forms of media. Crucially, as with Pat's astonishment above, there was often an emotional reaction in these instances. Participants were not merely absorbing words or images, or taking on board information to process and use to optimise decision making. They described an interaction which provoked, excited or unsettled them, in some way impacting on their view of the world and often part of a story of how they changed the way they acted. Sophie, for instance, when asked to explain why she made certain consumption choices, referred to reading a book that had cast doubts over shopping in supermarkets. This caused her to feel uncomfortable:

> That really changed the way I saw buying, a lot, like all the alternatives that I could look at, and how people treated their farmers and the way that there were no contracts really made me uncomfortable. (Sophie)

While Sophie's example was relatively recent, Faye described a much earlier memory of reading a book that she found at odds with her experience of the world around her:

> I read the teachings of Buddha when I was eight and that was a very good grounding for me in terms of things to cultivate and things to have as values … Living in central London at the time, looking at everybody running around and looking at the commuters on the buses, even at that age going 'I think this is a bit crazy. Why are they doing this?' (Faye)

More specifically, she contrasted this 'grounding' with her own upbringing:

> I thought my mother was crazy buying a new piece of furniture and then not opening the bills for three months. And you know, stuff being cut off, but having a beautiful chiffonier to put things in. To go to work

to get things. I thought it was crazy. To do a job that she hated. And I've always thought that was really loopy. (Faye)

Visual media, including documentary films and television programmes were also seen as influential in provoking a reaction. Marie said she was 'inspired' by seeing short films created by existing urban fruit harvesting groups, helping lead to her establishing a group in her own locality. By contrast Naomi was shocked by a programme she saw about waste management:

> I suppose something that helped me have an appreciation is understanding the kind of process of where rubbish goes … I don't know whether you saw the programme or not, but the Maldives have an island just for rubbish. It's an island of rubbish. That's mortifying … It never dawned on me until they showed me, just through a TV programme. (Naomi)

In other cases it took more than hearing about problems, from a distance, to generate a sufficiently strong reaction to derail existing habits of thought and action. It was important to experience something, to see it firsthand, in order to really engage with the issue, as Tom learnt when his friends first took him skipping with them:

> I was aware of it, but only a bit. I knew that supermarkets wasted food, but I hadn't really thought about it. I hadn't visualised what it might look like. And so having seen it, that makes me far more informed and far more likely to speak up about it. (Tom)

Chains of disruptive experiences

Examples so far in this section have tended to suggest relatively isolated incidents or short-lived periods of change, whether in discussing disruptions to ways of thinking about and seeing the world, or material changes in circumstance prompting different needs. However, participants typically described the combined effect of multiple events, or chains of experiences, in disrupting their old patterns and providing the opportunity to form new ones.

As noted in Chapter 6, Pat described how she had 'started down the environmental line' as a result of a chance encounter with rubbish:

> One summer I was helping my son with his paper round in the morning … and I realised how messy the path was and began to

> clear it up on the way back every day from helping him with his paper round. I just was wanting to keep fit. (Pat)

This quickly turned into a major undertaking: a 'one woman crusade' that would take 10 months to complete and attracted interest from the local press. Although her initial reasons for starting the clean-up were annoyance at the litter and exercise – she had developed an injury preventing her from her usual involvement in sport – the process of doing so over a sustained period was instrumental in making her think in depth about packaging and waste:

> I really do hate waste after my litter picking activities. I think litter picking's a great way into the environment because you pick up this stuff day after day and think do we need all this plastic? Where does this come from? Why did we not have it when I was a child? (Pat)

Moreover, off the back of this experience she was put in contact with, joined, and later began to run, a local environmental action group. In turn, this introduced her to further information about ecological issues and provoked her to think more seriously about the impacts of consumption:

> I suppose just surrounding that you can't help but read environmental reports and articles, and so on. And I became very aware of the Transition movement, the twin issues of climate change and peak oil and stuff like that. So yeah, it's kind of grown into a much more serious kind of– you have to be really thinking about changing your lifestyle here. (Pat)

The 'environmental interest' she gained through this chain of events, as well as her experience in running the action group, were together what she felt prompted her to consider starting an online reuse group in her locality.

In another case, Paul detailed a series of moments that eventually opened him up to the possibility of salvaging food from supermarket bins. There were first numerous instances where he was prompted to question what he valued and prioritised, starting at quite a general level. For example, he remembered 20 years ago becoming aware of being dissatisfied in his job, and then in his wider life, through a very gradual process:

> My own personal life was getting increased disillusionment, an increased sense that there was not much I could– it was wrong,

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disappointing and unethical, lots of aspects of my life, but nothing … I could do about it. (Paul)

This was followed by moments like the one cited above, deciding not to buy a new drill, where he began to question his relationship with things. Later still he began to hear about the amount of food thrown away by supermarkets, first by reading about it and then being reminded by a group of his friends who had started going skipping:

> The conversation with them reminded me of something I'd seen, I think in a newspaper … that had said about the percentage– I think it was 18 per cent of supermarket produce ends up landfill … I don't think I ever believed it [until] these guys started talking about the amount of waste, about the ruthless amount of waste that's in supermarket bins. (Paul)

Eventually, after taking on board the factual information about waste, then being prompted again by the testimonies of people he knew, Paul decided to go and see firsthand. Despite being pre-warned, seeing the quantity of food discarded with his own eyes was a jarring experience:

> Paul: I think the first bin … I dared to look in was, erm, Marks and Spencer's … So my first stage was, okay, I've been given some figures and stuff and then I've got some people that I know that do this and say that there's a criminal amount thrown away all the time, so finally I've got to this point of actually looking to see if they're right.
> MF: Were you on your own when you did that?
> Paul: Yeah. And was absolutely shocked … from my memory, it was a small Marks and Spencer's with like four or five large– these like four wheeled wheelie bins, chock-a-block full of stuff … and I'm thinking that's outrageous, but that was still a step away, I think, from being happy about doing it.

It was not until after one further experience, when his friends invited him to share in a meal made from salvaged food, that he began to go skipping for himself (see Section 9.4).

Finally in this section, an important counterpoint to make is that numerous participants had no specific memories of moments when their routine ways of thinking and acting were disrupted, while others were vague on the details. Several struggled to remember precisely how they had come to engage in

particular reclamation practices, possibly because too much time had passed since first doing so, but also suggesting that recruitment to new practices might be marked more by continuity, familiarity and small, unremarkable, incremental deviations than by conscious changes of direction.

9.4 Social networks and recruitment to practices

Some participants began to engage in reclaiming practices relatively independently. Their disposition to consuming in these particular ways, instilled through early socialisation, and/or their existing status as skilled practitioners of related practices sufficiently prepared them, making them ideal candidates for recruitment. Changing circumstances, or becoming aware of new ways of acquiring and disposing and recognising their ability to help fulfil some need or opportunity, was then enough to trigger engagement in these practices. In other cases, however, interpersonal connections played an important part in facilitating this recruitment. On the whole, it was more typical for participants to become relatively independently engaged in online reuse than was the case for urban fruit harvesting or skipping, perhaps reflecting the greater similarity – in the knowledge, skills and materials required as well as the attached cultural significance – between reuse and other more popular or established practices of getting and disposing of things, or the greater disruption to existing routines associated with fruit harvesting or skipping.

Exposure, endorsement and demonstration

Interpersonal relationships played at least three different roles in facilitating recruitment: initial exposure, endorsement and demonstration. First, as introduced in the previous section, word of mouth was one of a number of ways participants heard about reclaiming practices: their *initial exposure* was, in these instances, via people they knew. Some remembered a very specific connection, via their relationship with particular people directly involved in the practice. The following three participants, for example, recalled hearing about skipping for the first time from people already known to them:

> My ex-boyfriend, who is Italian but lived in Berlin, used to do it quite a
> lot … So, I was in London, he was in Berlin, and I thought 'my gosh,

that's super cool. I've never thought about it but I want to try'. (Gabriella)

I remember hearing about it in the beginning of second year … we have friends, like Simon and Stu [who] had been living there and hearing that they'd gone to bins and then being like, I don't know. I remember being a bit uncomfortable with it at first. (Sophie)

It was all down to Paul and Abby really. I don't think I even really knew about it. I knew there was food waste, but I don't think I'd ever conceived of the idea that you could actually go and get it. (Tom)

David was initially introduced to online reuse by his next door neighbour recounting his own experience: 'he'd got a lot of Apple equipment which he didn't want to dispose of at just the tip; he wanted to find a home for it'. While not immediately responding to this exposure by becoming involved, David later moved to a different area and made a new friend who was looking for help in trying to set up a local Freecycle group: 'so I picked it up and ran with it'. In Craig's case it was a mutual friend of his and another fruit harvester that first made the connection, recognising harvesting as something consistent with his existing interests:

A friend of mine said 'well I know somebody who does this; you'll probably like it'. So I went along to one of the formative meetings and I've been involved ever since. (Craig)

For others this initial contact was by word of mouth, but in a less direct way, or at least they were less specific in their remembering and telling of the story. Stu said he 'heard rumours' about the food available in supermarket bins:

Like with the bin picking you just hear, oh yeah, there's some people who get food from the bins. Oh right, that's weird yeah. And then gradually you hear of it more and more and then it's like, oh yeah, there's actually a lot of people that do that. I might try that one day.

It was mostly through people that I already knew. You just heard rumours of people being able to do it. (Stu)

Vicky could not remember specifically how she had first come across online reuse, but was confident that she had been introduced by somebody she knew:

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> I really can't remember. I think it definitely is word of mouth. Someone told me about it. There's no way I would have just come upon it on the Internet. (Vicky)

The examples so far also highlight diverging responses to hearing about alternative consumption practices for the first time. Taking skipping, for instance, Gabriella thought it sounded 'super cool' and wanted to try it, whereas Sophie felt 'a bit uncomfortable' and Stu initially thought it was 'weird'. Simply knowing that something could be done (by somebody else) was not necessarily enough to make someone want to do it. Stu gradually heard more and more stories of different people taking food from bins until, eventually, it became something that he might try himself. This suggests that increased or sustained exposure to a new practice, and realisation of its extent and spread, increased the sense that it was thinkable or doable.

This brings discussion to the second role played by relationships: not only in drawing attention to new practices but in providing an *endorsement.* Some participants felt that observing or hearing of trusted friends' positive experiences of a practice had made them more likely to try it for themselves. For Emily this was a significant factor in her becoming engaged in both online reuse and skipping, reassuring her respectively of the effectiveness and safety of these practices:

> I had a friend who was using [Freecycle] and had been using it for about two years, so I was aware that it worked.

> I think I probably read and heard about [skipping] through friends, and then, you know, once they'd done it and it'd all been safe, it was like alright then. (Emily)

Gabriella valued having somebody show her 'that it was perfectly normal' to recover discarded food. For her, as in a number of accounts, the 'endorsement' actually occurred implicitly in the same moment as the 'exposure': seeing people she identified with participate in a new (to her) practice was a positive testimony in its own right about that practice. Similarly, for Stu, developing a growing number of friendships with people who went skipping, and as a result being surrounded by people that did not see a problem with getting food out of bins, for whom it was not a matter of contention, served as a kind of

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endorsement by omission, communicated through action. The fact that it was increasingly seen as an accepted way of acquiring food within his social circle helped make skipping a thinkable thing to do himself:

> I think if everyone that I knew was like, 'eugh! I wouldn't do that', or never even talked about it in a good light at all, I probably would never even have considered it. But it just so happened I was getting more and more friends who were already doing it or had heard about it and, yeah, got into it that way.

A third role of relationships in introducing alternative consumption practices was *demonstration*. In some cases this was achieved through 'sharing', that is, existing users of a particular alternative channel gave some of the goods acquired through that channel to other people. Paul described an early experience of eating skipped food when visiting a group of friends:

> They advertised that they were going to have this meal from just salvaged food and up to then we hadn't really salvaged anything for ourselves. We were new to the whole thing, just thinking about it ... and we thought we'd better have some food first. We were a bit peckish so we thought we'd buy some chips ... and we just got there and they just had the most lavish spread I've– it was like a wedding; do you know what I mean? … You'd never believe it would have come out of a bin. I wouldn't have done then. (Paul)

This anecdote is interesting as it portrays a couple that were already familiar with the idea of reclaiming food from bins, had friends that did so regularly and had started to think about it for themselves. Yet they had very low expectations of the quality and quantity of food available in this way until they experienced a skipped meal first hand. By sharing, their friends gave them an opportunity to have this experience before taking the riskier step of going skipping themselves.

More commonly, participants talked about experiencing demonstration of alternative consumption practices through 'showing': existing practitioners acted as guides, taking others with them – metaphorically or literally – and allowing them to experience the alternative practice directly. In some cases this worked in a similar way to the example of sharing discussed above. Sophie, as mentioned earlier, had felt uncomfortable on first hearing about her friends going skipping. Like Paul, she explained that she did not realise that

supermarkets would dispose of so much food that was still edible; she 'thought it was just bad food that people were taking'. This changed after she and a friend, also new to skipping, accompanied their more experienced friends to a shop's bins for the first time:

> We were like 'ooh, let's go with them one day'. So we went to [name of shop] and we realised how much was there and how it was all exactly the same stuff as was in the shop. (Sophie)

Tom described a similar experience. In his case it was not only the availability of goods that was revelatory, but the ease of accessing it. Through his friendship with Paul and Abby waste food was transformed from something that he had never conceived of getting into a realistic source of sustenance:

> I went skipping with them, and they got one of the biggest hauls they've ever got, so that was probably partly it. Couldn't believe how much waste there was and how easy it was to acquire. (Tom)

Furthermore, demonstrating a new practice meant lending moral support by accompanying would-be practitioners in their initial engagement. Faye, who talked at length about her routinely recovering (non-food) items from skips in the street, liked the idea of skipping for food, but had not done so as she found the idea of visiting supermarket bins daunting:

> What I know about skipping for food is that you need to be at the supermarkets later on in the evening and that's not something I'm very comfortable doing. I don't like being out late at night on my own … That would be something I'd be interested in trying, but I wouldn't necessarily want to do it on my own. (Faye)

Emily had been in a similar position, but had had the benefit of friends to go skipping with. Again, she self-identified as having the prerequisite attributes of a potential skipper, experienced in reclaiming and repurposing unwanted things from other sources and feeling it was consistent with her ethical perspective, but saw having the support of a group as crucial to her eventual engagement in the practice:

> I don't think I would have generally skip-dived if I hadn't had friends who were doing it already and stuff. I agree with the ethics of that but

might not have gone quite so far as to do it on my own if it hadn't been for a group of us doing it. (Emily)

And Stu had experienced this same barrier from the opposite perspective; as an experienced skipper he was often approached by friends interested in going along with him to the bins. Despite having personally been on his own when he first went skipping, he was able to empathise with their concern:

> It's the kind of thing that is quite scary doing it on your own, because of it being questionably legal and, I dunno, it's just hard to know where to go. So people always say, 'oh, look, take me with you'. (Stu)

Recruits becoming recruiters

As the last example alludes, another important aspect in seeking to understand the part played by social networks in engagement in alternative consumption practices is how participants have themselves acted as recruiters: in what ways have they introduced the practice to other people, intentionally or otherwise? Again it is useful to consider the role played by interpersonal relationships in initial exposure, endorsement and demonstration.

First, it makes sense to discuss exposure and endorsement together. It was common for participants to communicate – verbally or practically – their use of alternative channels to the numerous other people in whose midst they lived their lives: family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and so on. In doing so they helped expose those people to consumption practices that, in some cases, they may have rarely or never come into contact with. At the same time they often, explicitly or implicitly, endorsed those practices as enjoyable, effective, ethical or in some other sense worth doing. For Naomi this was experienced as a somewhat natural or spontaneous outpouring of her enthusiasm for reuse initiatives:

> If people have come round we might have got onto the topic or something. And, you know, I always get excited when I start talking about it. I'm like, you know, it's just amazing what you can find on there. (Naomi)

Other participants similarly alluded to this overflowing excitement leading to conversation. Some described how they enjoyed, or took pride in, telling people about what they had managed to acquire through online reuse networks:

> I am very very proud when people come into my house and I say I have furnished this house on Freecycle. (Vicky)

> And some things you can boast about, you know; some people don't believe you. When I say 'oh I got...' they go 'no way; you didn't get that'. I go 'I did'. (Ali)

By contrast Olivia was willing, but less enthusiastic about, sharing her experiences of reuse and did not feel strongly about promoting alternative consumption practices to other people.

In other cases, it was the participant visibly (even garishly!) engaging in reclaiming practices that served as a prompt for discussion. Faye felt that by consuming in particular ways, by living with integrity, she could potentially have a positive influence on people close to her:

> Faye: I think it encourages other people to look at these as ideas, like do I need a new whatever? I've got old towels and I dyed them bright pink … they're fuchsia, flamingo, outrageously garish pink, and then my neighbours go, 'ah, I could do that with mine'.

> MF: So have you kind of seen that happen then?

> Faye: Yeah.

> MF: You've seen it kind of rubbing off on other people?

> Faye: Yeah, and people who think 'well actually I can't afford to get a new bed', you get them saying 'well why don't you ask if you can get a new mattress? What's wrong with asking?' Actually there's nothing wrong with asking.

Alongside these spontaneous interactions, some talked about more consciously being an 'advocate' or 'spreading the word'. Vicky was at times tactical in how she communicated the benefits of reuse to those around her: 'I explain Freecycle differently to who I'm explaining it to. I judge them on how I think they're gonna be, on how I know them and how I think they're gonna be'. Kirsty

took a similar approach, recommending reuse networks as a solution to her friends' and relatives' self-identified practical problems:

> Other people will sort of say to me, you know, 'oh I've got this whatever it is and I don't know what to do with it and it's broken and I don't think anyone would want it'. And I say 'well put it on Freecycle', and whether they ever do, I don't know, but I say that to them. Or again if they're wanting things, you know, 'why don't you try Freecycle?' And I don't know whether they do. (Kirsty)

Reactions to talking about or recommending alternative ways of consuming were mixed. Some responses were hostile; people were used to getting things new or were sceptical about goods that have already been used:

> When I tell my colleagues that, you know, I'm wearing second-hand clothes they look at me a bit like, 'God, somebody else has worn them before you?' And I think they're all a little bit scared or, yeah, maybe intimidated or, you know, they think you're a bit odd. (Karen)

Alternatively there was an assumed association between monetary cost and worth, a belief that people would not give something away if it still had value or that free stuff must be essentially rubbish.

> A lot of people when you first told them are very sceptical because it's like 'well you don't get anything for free' and 'what's wrong with it?' and 'is it just a load of crap?', and I'm like 'you should see the stuff I get', you know. (Vicky)

Participants also reported more positive responses. Carole said that through talking about her experiences of online reuse networks her daughter had begun to use them herself, while Amy had successfully encouraged her mother and sister to do so. Others felt that they had at least prompted people around them to think differently, to question their assumptions, perhaps early steps on a longer journey to changing their actions. Gabriella explained that, when telling work colleagues about her engagement in various alternative practices, initial reactions were typically negative, even dismissive:

> The first reaction would most likely be 'no way'. For couch surfing [it] goes without saying, because 'oh my God strangers living in your house?', but even something like Freecycle, probably the average

question would be 'oh why can't you just throw it away?' … I've heard that so many times. (Gabriella)

Over time, however, they became gradually more open to these alternatives, albeit not necessarily ready to consider them a possibility in their own lives:

> But then, the second time I maybe talk about it with them they would go like 'oh yeah, maybe'. And you know, slowly, slowly. If they already start thinking about it, that's a good start. Then from there to action, that's the bigger jump, the longest, the longer jump. But I guess already for people that are so, so far away from these concepts, for them to get in touch with somebody that does it, is already a good start. I see that a lot. (Gabriella)

This example highlights the often slow, incremental nature of change, mirroring many participants' own stories as seen through this chapter so far. A common way that people responded positively to the idea of alternative channels of acquisition and disposal – especially online reuse – was to ask the participant, as the experienced practitioner, to act on their behalf. Sometimes this was as an intermediate step on the way to becoming more directly engaged; for many others this was the limit of their involvement to date.

Second, then, participants further exposed newcomers to particular practices through demonstration. Following an initial conversation with her neighbours, in which she 'introduced them to the idea of Freegle', Susan had subsequently helped them to give things away on more than one occasion:

> A little while later their mum came and knocked on our front door and said could we please help. She had a dining table and chairs, she had a sofa and cushions, a standard light, and all sorts of other things that they didn't want and that they had no use for and didn't know what to do with. So I stuck them all on the group and they all got taken … And they've come back again since, saying can I please help and put things on the group for them. (Susan)

Others had helped friends, family members and neighbours to get things they needed through reuse networks. For example:

> We have a young married couple living downstairs from us. They were talking about buying their daughter a little slide and various things for the garden, and I said 'don't do that, I'll get it for you on

Freecycle', and rather than have them join I kind of got stuff for them.
(Pat)

Ali had acquired particular items for friends and family, responding to their requests for things. He felt they were unlikely to become active in their own right, due to the perceived time and effort involved in doing so. As an established member of reuse networks he was able to facilitate their indirect engagement in the practice:

People think 'oh I haven't got time to set my own account up, so can you do it for us?' … but I don't think they're gonna go out– I think it's easier for them just to ask me, so I do all the dirty work if you wanna call it. Like recently I got my sister an ironing board. In a way I felt proud of it as well. (Ali)

Beverly tended to get things for her son and his wife 'because they know I'm the one that'll be on the computer all the time' and 'because they just can't get it together to do it'. Like Ali, the combination of her experience as a user and the difficulty her son and daughter-in-law faced in adopting a new practice into their routine – 'get[ting] it together to do it' – meant that they remained indirect practitioners of online reuse.

Fruit harvesters and skippers also talked about acquiring goods on behalf of other people they knew. Sally could not eat all the fruit she took home from a pick, but enjoyed sharing it with her friends:

Any extra I had I gave out to a … young family that live beside me and to a friend of mine who's ill. She can't get out very often. She loves all this but she can't attend because of illness, so I gave out to her. So it was in my community, in my little gang of friends, everyone knew that it was happening. They didn't go, but they knew that it was happening. (Sally)

Again, as with the online reuse examples above, she was able to act as an intermediary for others who wanted to engage in the practice but were not able to do so directly. Similarly, as noted in Chapter 7, skippers described how they distributed the surplus food they found amongst friends. Some, like Stu and Paul, delivered to specific people who they thought might make use of the food, whereas Tom would leave it out for anyone on the street to help themselves.

Either way, the priority was to ensure that as much as possible of the discarded food ended up being eaten:

> I would say like I feel a strong responsibility to make sure that it doesn't get wasted and I will make a fairly big effort to make sure that it gets used … We put whatever we have extra on the wall. We used to label it free food and thrown out by supermarkets, but now people know where it's coming from. (Tom)

While some recipients of this food had ended up going skipping themselves, on the whole Tom felt they were likely to remain indirect beneficiaries, grateful for the free food and unfazed by it having been found in bins, but not ready to go and collect it themselves:

> They're not people who are really struggling for money, but a bit of free stuff actually does really help them. The waste itself doesn't concern them enough to actually go and rescue it themselves, but once it's been rescued they don't have a problem with actually using it. (Tom)

One further way participants demonstrated skipping was by taking others with them, in the same way that many of them had had their first encounter with the bins. Simon remembered on one occasion taking his mother skipping, when she came to visit him; she was initially reluctant, but ended up enjoying the experience:

> She found it funny. She was just sort of like 'no, we can't do that', at first. But then before long she was like 'oh look at this, this is really good'. I said 'yeah, there you go, you can have that'. (Simon)

In some cases the people they took with them had themselves become active skippers. Within the interview sample, Paul had taken Tom on his first skipping trip, and Tom had since taken others along including one of his neighbours.

9.5 Alternatives becoming normal

Discussion so far in this chapter has focused on how participants came to engage in new practices for the first time. Here consideration turns to sustainment (or otherwise) of this initial engagement: how using alternative conduits became normal, or not, and what this meant for participants; the extent to which the new practice was accommodated within the routines of everyday

life; and how engagement in alternative ways of consuming interacted with other ongoing practices. In exploring the processes by which an alternative practice might become normal it is instructive to consider examples both where this happened successfully and where it did not. In fact, it often made more sense for participants to isolate and articulate barriers to a practice becoming part of normal life, or reasons for it ceasing to be so, than to talk about the factors involved in sustaining routine activity, which by its nature tends to involve an absence of active thinking, questioning and discussing (Wilk, 2009). As Simon summed up the process of normalisation:

> when you don't question it anymore it's more normal … I expect the questioning of it would be something that is a barrier to it becoming normality. (Simon)

Conducive circumstances and material needs

Just as life circumstances and associated material needs played a key role in bringing about their initial encounters with reclamation practices, for some participants continued engagement in those practices relied on the continuation of those or similarly conducive circumstances. Conversely, if initial engagement was about meeting a particular need, and that need was no longer present or important, then for some this meant an end to, or a reduction in, consuming in that way. As seen earlier, Kirsty had initially become a prolific user of online reuse networks around the time she moved house, primarily as a way of disposing of a substantial accumulation of unwanted things. After this had been achieved she had less reason to continue to use reuse networks and so her active engagement had decreased:

> The reason there was a lot of stuff is because we moved house, so there were things that we had in our old house that we had to get rid of, and there were also things in the new house which the previous owners had left behind which we didn't need. So I think probably I'm not using it so much now, but there was a period where we just seemed to be constantly advertising things. (Kirsty)

However, now that she had been active in online reuse she suggested that it would remain part of a repertoire of practices: reuse networks would continue to be one of a range of channels to potentially use for acquisition or disposal. In a

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similar way, Olivia had originally made use of online reuse networks to furnish a flat. When this was complete she continued to use these channels but on a more ad hoc basis:

> Like in a year's time I had pretty much the house furnished. And it was just really odds, odd bits, odd items that I'd say oh that might be of some use.

> So I still use it but not as often, because I've kind of like reached a plateau or something like that. So I actually happened to bump into stuff that I had got from Freegle and that I'm not actually using and put it back in the cycle, so I do that. I gave it away. (Olivia)

This second quote implies that the way Olivia used Freegle had changed in response to her changing circumstance: some time after successfully furnishing her home she was able to start passing on things that she had previously acquired but no longer wanted. Others described how they had begun to give or receive in response to particular need, but subsequently experienced a series of different situations in which they had continued to do so. For example:

> My mother died in the mid 2000s, in 2006, and so I had a lot of things which I took back from her home but in the end I decided not to keep, and so there was that period as well. And then we also had kitchen and bathroom redone in the mid 2000s as well, and so you know, various household items had to go. And so there were those sort of big times of upheaval, where there were more goods than usual that I needed to give away. But in the last couple of years … the number of things Freecycled over the course of the year has gone down enormously, because there just hasn't been very much of it. (Sandra)

Although the volume had decreased, Sandra remained active in her local reuse group: 'I mean, just before you came here today somebody collected three large cardboard boxes because they were moving'. Amy told a similar story, highlighting the changing nature of her engagement during different periods of her recent life. She had first used online reuse networks to get things for a shared house – 'yeah, never really had the money to kit ourselves out with brand new stuff' – but she 'didn't have so much to give away at that point'. Some time later, when moving with her partner to a smaller property in a different city, she gave away much of the contents of their flat. In the same way,

Naomi anticipated some of the changing ways that she might engage with online reuse in the foreseeable future:

> Now that we kind of have our house of things [and] I've managed to get a number of baby items for number two … there's not going to be too much more that I think I need. I'm going to keep my eyes open because if I could get myself like a birthing pool or something like that, that'd be great. So I'll always keep my eyes on it.

> We might have to downsize … or we might have to move out of the area, and at that point, definitely, we'd be offloading loads of stuff through Freecycle. And also once baby things we don't need anymore, again probably offload all of that into Freecycle. Goes back into the system. You know, we got it out of the system; we'll put it back into the system. So definitely still use it. (Naomi)

Accommodating new practices in everyday life

If they were to take root it was important for alternative consumption practices to (continue to) fit within the rhythms and routines of participants' everyday lives. This emerged most clearly in discussions of times when they had been more and less active practitioners. Katy, for example, was more likely to go skipping at certain times of year, reflecting how much time she had available alongside other activities. When free time was in short supply, she preferred the convenience of buying food:

> I think I kind of go most like when I've got most time. Like in the summers I would go quite a lot and kind of eat mostly out of bins. But times like this when I'm studying a lot, it's kind of– it's much easier to get a veg box. (Katy)

Similarly Sally described how her involvement in urban fruit harvesting had 'tapered off' towards the end of her first harvesting season, due to increasing work commitments. As well as fluctuating with participants' changing levels of busyness, the degree of fit with daily routines also varied from one period of life to another. Tom explained that before becoming a father skipping had been a main regular source of food, but that he now visited the bins much less often. To avoid conflict with supermarket staff he had always preferred to go skipping when the shops were closed, the timings of which no longer corresponded to the temporality of his life as a parent:

Unfortunately skipping is a nocturnal activity and we're less nocturnal these days so the only time we do go is on a Sunday when they close early. (Tom)

His trips to bins were, it is worth noting, still a matter of routine, albeit only 'once every two weeks these days': each fortnight, after his regular church meeting, he would 'just go straight round the back of the [nearby supermarket], jump in their bins and take anything that they've thrown out, and that's it really'. Stu had also found it less convenient to go skipping recently, compared with during a previous stage of his life. When he was a student a significant proportion of his food had been salvaged from bins, as it was possible to do so with minimal deviation from existing routes and routines. Since moving to a different part of the city regular skipping had, for practical reasons, become more difficult:

A big part of why that was so easy was that [name of shop] was on my way home from university and Co-op was just up the road. Whereas now I don't go that often because I live in [area] and there's not that many bins round here that are that good. So I just go … if I'm passing. (Stu)

More broadly, participants talked about how difficult it was to adopt and sustain new ways of doing things if this meant a disruption to existing practices. Although not skipping as often as he used to, Stu was still trying (and mostly succeeding) to avoid buying food from supermarkets, instead preferring to buy from local trading cooperatives. However, he described one particular area of difficulty in achieving this: providing himself with a lunchtime meal while at work; he struggled to incorporate time for making sandwiches into his daily routine and found it easier to buy something to eat 'there and then'. At a second interview, nearly two months later, I asked if this had changed:

I've not done it. I've not made my lunch once. In fact, yesterday I bought some bread and salad with the intention of being like 'yes, I will make lunch with this'. And I didn't make it today. So maybe tomorrow (laughs). I'll let you know if I do. (Stu)

What Stu's story helps illustrate is how difficult it can be to accommodate different ways of consuming in the context of a busy life – even when the person concerned is highly engaged and experienced as an 'alternative' consumer – and that often the convenience of instead buying something via a

more conventional channel plays a decisive role. Likewise Sandra, who had regularly given via online reuse networks, explained why she had rarely used them to acquire things:

> I suppose the reason why I don't take much from Freecycle and never have done is because I can't be bothered to go and fetch them. You know, I'm busy; I work full time, you know; I do household chores. I really can't be bothered to walk all the way … to go and fetch something that I could pop into a shop and buy. (Sandra)

Practices shaping other practices

Third, alternative practices were accommodated into the routines of normal life through a process of shaping both new and existing practices to ensure a good fit. As seen in Chapter 6, there can be a large degree of variation as to how the same practice is performed in different circumstances and by different people. Accommodation of alternatives meant, in some cases, evolving particular ways of performing the practice to fit particular circumstances.

At the simplest level this might involve coordinating participation in the new practice so as not to clash with prior commitments. Trish, for instance, found the flexibility of involvement in urban fruit harvesting an important factor in her continued engagement:

> With a lot of voluntary groups when you sign up you'll sort of– it's a bit of a danger; you're kind of dumped with a lot of work and, you know, and it was quite the reverse of that. It's been very easy just to kind of tag along and, you know, do a little bit, whatever you feel like doing and not do more than that. (Trish)

As already noted, Tom routinely visited a particular skipping site after going to a church meeting on a Sunday afternoon. Paul gave a detailed description of his regular skipping route, designed to fit in with a particular favourite leisure pursuit – paragliding in the countryside – and in doing so make efficient use of both time and resources:

> I am aware that I will use a certain amount of fuel to get out into the hills and it's not very practical– very difficult to find another way of getting out in the hills, and so part of my normal practice that helps

me to feel that the whole trip is more efficient is if I can … thread my way back home via all the supermarkets I can find. (Paul)

The route took in numerous stops along the way before arriving at one particular supermarket back in the city where he would collect discarded boxes and pack them full of salvaged produce to deliver to friends' houses on the remainder of his journey home:

> I will take these vegetable boxes, erm, and organise the food that I've already acquired on my route into sensible sort of portions to actually deliver to people's doors. And that takes quite a while and often it needs a bit of wiping down.

> [The supermarket] also has an outside tap so I can do some sort of rinsing there. So I've got this little process where I think, there's the stopping point where I organise and re-organise the food. (Paul)

By contrast, others were more opportunistic skippers. While for Paul and Tom it was a relatively planned exercise that was arranged to fit in with regular patterns of activity, Stu accommodated skipping into his life by taking the opportunity as and when it arose: 'I never really do it as an organised thing, it's just I'm passing by and I've got room in my bag so I'll just go in'. Two quite different models of skipping, then, were both developed as a way to maximise the fit with other ongoing practices.

Several participants offered examples of how they gave and received via online reuse networks in ways that subtly deviated from the 'standard' model, in order to minimise disruption to their existing routines. As Sandra put it, 'you just have to organise it the way that suits you'. One commonly cited negative experience of giving via reuse groups was having to wait at home for the recipient to come to collect the item, with the risk, occasionally borne out, that they would not turn up. Sandra and Anita had developed different ways of dealing with this potential issue:

> I mean some of them mess you about, you know, cos they don't turn up when they should … But actually what I mostly do these days is put the item– if the item's small enough I put it in our recycling bin out the front and give them directions and say pick it up from the recycle bin … And that means they can come when it suits them, and I don't

need to be disturbed or think when's the doorbell going to ring, you know. So you know it works quite well that way. (Sandra)

But what I do say to them, what I do do in my Freecycle posts now is I say you must pick it up at this time. If you cannot pick it up at this time you can't have it. And that's because you get blown out so much by people who don't turn up, cos it's such a big Freecycle. So my way of controlling that is to say if you can't pick it up on Wednesday night at 5 o'clock, you will not have it. Or between 5 and 8; I give them a window. (Anita)

On the other hand, new ways of consuming interacted with ongoing routines by helping shape participants' performances of existing practices, changing or occasionally replacing some of the other things that they regularly did. Ali and Gemma both explained how, after becoming engaged in online reuse, they would now be more inclined to try to find new homes for things they no longer wanted, whereas in the past they might have thrown those things away through conventional waste management channels:

I mean now if I ever like, for example, have something that I would have in the past took to the dump-it site, or whatever you want to call it – recycling site – I'd first think about recycling it or donating it to somebody. Yeah, definitely. (Ali)

I'll find something which I think 'oh I don't use this anymore'; before if it was just the one individual thing or a couple of things I would have thrown it away. Now, I'll put it on Freecycle to see if anyone wants it, before I throw it away. Or take it to the charity shop, whatever. (Gemma)

Over time previous routines, replaced by alternative practices, ceased to be normal. For some participants, after many years of relying predominantly on numerous second hand sources of goods, buying new things had begun to feel alien:

But now it would be unthinkable for me to go into a shop and buy an item of clothes new. I probably haven't done that for about 10 years. (Anita)

Because I only do charity shopping really now, I don't go to the kind of retail sector let's say … I just forgot how tiring and annoying it is going shopping. It's easy to get sucked up in it. I used to love, you know, going shopping, but it's easy to get sucked up in it and it just

takes up so much time as well. And we still didn't walk away with a pair of shoes in the end. I ended up buying them online. (Naomi)

Prompted by her involvement in and enjoyment of fruit harvesting, Sally had begun trying to change her food shopping habits, in recognition of what she felt was the superior quality of seasonal produce:

> Sally: The other thing I'm trying to do as a result of this is not buy fruit that isn't in season. I'm trying to stop doing that. Because I'm always disappointed when I'm eating cardboard, you know. And I want to get out of this … so this whole apple thing has just made me a little bit more aware.
>
> MF: So how have you found that? Like have you been fairly successful with it?
>
> Sally: Well I didn't buy strawberries today now … I looked at them and I thought 'oh God they look great'. Of course they look great. Erm, they're meant to look great. And then I remembered and I thought I'm on my way– cos I was meeting you and so the apple thing's in my head. I thought 'what are you buying them for'?

Craig painted a similar picture, albeit citing more environmentally-conscious narratives around excessive consumption and the ecological impact of eating without regard for seasons:

> I make a conscious effort to consume less, and I suppose that's partly influenced by Abundance. I'm a lot more concerned now than I was say two or three years ago even about sustainability and seasonality. So, yes that is a concern and I do take note of where my food comes from. I do ask myself 'do I really need to buy X, Y, Z?', so I suppose yeah that is an underlying concern.

However, as another fruit harvester observed, being made aware or increasingly concerned about particular issues was not always sufficient to translate into wider action. As this chapter has made clear, adopting different ways of consuming can require more than just information or a change of perspective:

> I think about waste a bit more since starting the project, but I don't think it's ultimately changed my habits … like sometimes I do forget and the bread goes absolutely rock hard and I can't even make a, you know, a crumble topping or whatever. (Marie)

Forgetting to notice

Just as adopting new practices involved a disruption to habits and bringing unthinking actions into question (or cultivation), those practices becoming part of normal life seemingly involves a reverse of this process, what Wilk (2009) terms naturalisation. New ways of doing things become second nature.

Paul had, over time, ceased to notice the more unpleasant aspects of taking food from bins, like the mess that used to repulse him:

> Gradually I've become quite hardened, to the point where sometimes we have to remember, you know, when we … drink out of a milk bottle that's got loads of yoghurt spilt on it or something– we now think 'oh that can be rinsed off, that's not going to affect the inside at all', but I know once, not too long ago, only a few years ago, when I would have been repulsed by the idea of fishing this milk, thoroughly good milk, because it has got mess on it, you know. (Paul)

It was only when he stopped and thought about it – having to consciously remind himself, for example, that others he wanted to share the produce with might not be so 'hardened' – that he realised it was no longer something he regularly thought about. While Paul described this forgetting process happening on an individual basis, his encounters with discarded food becoming less remarkable or worthy of his attention as he became desensitised to it, Simon observed a similar development at a more social level. When he first encountered skipping it was something new and different, provoking regular discussion amongst people around him, but this changed with time:

> And then it just became a thing that was so normal amongst people I knew, that it wasn't exciting or interesting; it was just normal. (Simon)

Being surrounded by a group of people who were increasingly familiar with skipping, it ceased to be worthy of discussion, less likely to prompt questioning and require justification. And as interpersonal conversations about skipping became rarer, so did what might be called, by analogy, the internal conversation, consciously choosing one option over another for articulable reasons:

If when you do things you're explaining why you're doing them and you're having to justify them, and if you talk to someone about it you say 'I'm doing this'. They'll be like 'oh what are you doing?' … but before too long if you're doing things and you've already explained why you're doing them, and you're *just doing them* by that time, and you forget that you ever chose, so by the time someone becomes a vegetarian if they're often around vegetarians they don't think about the fact that they're a vegetarian. They don't think I'm choosing not to eat this today. It becomes normality. (Simon)

For Simon this was a comparable process to acquiring a new skill. Part of the process of becoming a skilled practitioner was forgetting to take notice, being able to do something without thinking about doing it:

Just like when you first drive a car it feels a bit scary, like 'what am I doing driving a car?' And after a while it just feels like– you don't think about it. You just talk about something else while you're doing it. (Simon)

Support and approval

Just as relationships played a role for many participants in their initial engagement in a practice, they were equally important in helping to sustain and normalise that engagement (Cherry, 2006). This meant support by specific individuals, the wider acceptance and approval of a wider yet still localised culture or milieu, and trends in the more generally prevailing culture.

Practices were more likely to 'bed in' to someone's life if people around them were supportive of the activity. The people around them might mean specific known individuals, people in their wider group or community, and society at large.

Similar to Simon's example above, for Tom the fact that his friends went skipping, and did so as a routine way of sourcing their food, quickly diffused the initial otherness of the practice. Two friends, as seen earlier in Section 9.4, had been particularly influential in introducing him to skipping and, likewise, it was spending time with them that helped it become a normal part of his own life:

It was the fact that it was so normal to them, because they'd been doing it for years, it very quickly lost its radical scary edge that made it a very out there thing to do. Because I was hanging around with

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people for whom it was normal, it very quickly became normal to me. (Tom)

Other participants spoke about how their friends shared their views or concerns, valuing things and actions in the same way as they did:

I would say most of my friends are all– like have quite similar ethics and similar concerns to me, which is really nice because we can get kind of excited about stuff together, like really excited about mending things or going to a bin. (Katy)

Obviously it's easy when I speak to my closest friends, cos they're people that have more or less the same views as me, so they wouldn't see it as a bad thing. (Gabriella)

Again, reading these examples in light of Simon's theory of social forgetting – 'when you don't question it anymore it's more normal' – the acceptance and understanding of close peers was a key factor in alternatives becoming routine and unthinking, or in Gabriella's terms 'easy'. Sophie had adjusted more than once to different normalities, in a series of different living situations. At home she had been brought up being encouraged not to shop in large chain supermarkets, on ethical grounds, but on moving away and learning to budget for herself, was surrounded by people with different priorities:

It was the first time I hadn't lived at home and I was– I didn't have much money; I didn't know how to handle my money or anything … I just had to adapt really fast and I just ended up shopping at like Netto and really bad places. But it was mostly like 'ooh, we could save loads of money' and I just kind of forgot about my morals and stuff, and none of my friends really had those kind of morals, so I just, erm, I forgot. I forgot about it. I just forgot about it. (Sophie)

Subsequently, a number of disruptive moments (see Section 9.3) and conversations with friends (Section 9.4) had prompted her to begin sourcing food in different ways. However, this remained at odds with her housemates at the time, until moving into her current home at the time of the interview:

Moving in here was like a real relief because I knew everyone liked doing the same things and like shopping in the same way and it's much easier, erm, feels much more relaxed being somewhere where you can just– you don't have to be worried about what your

housemates might think of you getting things from bins and stuff …
Yeah, it just feels much easier, like more natural. (Sophie)

Wider than individual friendships, participants talked about the influence of numerous notions of localised communities and their cultures (spatially-defined and otherwise) in helping sustain engagement in alternative practices. Some referred to particular geographical localities. In reference to her adopted home city, Sandra felt it was a place where recycling and reusing things were the norm, at least relative to how these activities was seen by her family:

They're not interested in it. They throw things away and buy new things. You know, they're not like me at all. They think I'm a bit of a nutter really. But [here] though you can be like this and you're totally accepted. You know, it's very much that kind of place. (Sandra)

Sally had lived in two parts of the same neighbourhood, with markedly different experiences of locally acceptable practices around moving on unwanted things. Where she lived at the time of the interview – 'the more transient area' with 'a lot more students' and where 'people are a lot more artisan' – it was common for people to give things away by leaving them outside for others to collect:

There's a thing in our street. It's not just me that does it; everyone does it. We just put stuff on our wall if we want to get rid of it. (Sally)

Compared with where she used to live, 'on the other side, the more upmarket side' where 'it never happened', this type of informal reuse exchange was 'perfectly acceptable' in her current location.

Others talked about particular communities of interest or communities of practice that they belonged to. One example was participants working in the arts, who saw their fellow community members as broadly accepting of getting second hand goods and other alternative ways of owning and sharing property:

Also, being like in the arts, and most of my friends are in the arts, we're all skint. Which is a big thing, so no-one's got that chance to always buy new. (Amy)

I did fine art, so you know it's already quite alternative on that scene to a degree anyway, and a lot of friends– a lot of the people I met were already quite embroiled with the local co-ops and everything anyway. And you know I got on with them and it was interesting going

to stuff and they kind of– we had a lot of, yeah, the same views on lots of kind of ways of thinking and stuff. (Emily)

These localised communities of different kinds, and the alternative cultures and practices they helped sustain, were marked by frequent cross-fertilisation, albeit within a small pool. Performing particular practices brought people into contact with others, often with similar tastes, principles, experiences and so on. In turn, through meeting these other people they might be introduced to further new practices, and meet more new people through this subsequent involvement.

> I guess partly … it's kind of like shared experience isn't it? Cos say I get really excited about, erm, like doing some kind of volunteer project or something which fits in with I guess like my ethical concerns, and then I'd go and do that, then I'll meet people there and then I'm likely to make friends with them, and they're likely to be interested in the same thing, because they're at the same thing. (Katy)

They quickly realised that they kept seeing the same people at different sites or doing different activities, in some cases eventually forging friendships. Encountering mostly like-minded people consolidated particular ways of talking and thinking about and doing consumption and, once again, helped facilitate participants' continued engagement in alternative practices:

> Yeah and then I guess meeting all the people that get involved in that, they're all sort of like-minded people, who are interested in sustainability and living off the land, and like hippies who like connect with nature and all that. So the more you're exposed to something the more interest you take in it. Or at least it was easier to get more interested in it … And a lot of those friends that I met through Abundance are the friends that have inspired me to live a different way. Or at least inspired me to take sustainability seriously, because they do, basically, and it's like, it's easy to do what your friends do. (Stu)

Despite this effect of localised cultures, participants were not insulated from wider, what many saw as more mainstream, cultures. Their own stories of coming to engage in alternative consumption practices were set in the context of broader changes in how people talk about and act in relation to unwanted things. Several participants felt that getting things second hand, especially

clothes and furniture, had lost some of its previously held stigma (at least in certain social quarters) and even become fashionable in recent years:

> You go on the Internet and you see things about upcycling and reusing stuff to make other stuff, and there's, you know, wearing retro type clothes from charity shops has become– is becoming more sort of acceptable rather than, you know, when I was young it was just like you were terrible– you were so poor and it was like a stigma. (Christine)

> Once upon a time having – you know, I've got mismatched chairs, cos I've got chairs second hand – erm, it would have been really bad, but now with shabby chic and this kind of thing, it's actually quite fashionable to have mismatched chairs. You know, it's quite interesting how that's turned around, you know. (Vicky)

Others noted the wider reach of environmental concerns in the public consciousness, with issues around waste management (especially recycling) and climate change having become highly publicised via mainstream media. Similarly, health concerns had helped increase interest in food and where it comes from:

> One woman said at the time 'oh I haven't got the time to be sorting out cans and whatever'. She'd recycled nothing and there were no facilities. And I laughed and said to her 'you're saying that now but I bet in a year or two's time you'll be doing it without even thinking about it' and she now is. She couldn't have imagined it at the time we were talking about it. (Pat)

> I see … the whole Abundance idea as fitting into a sort of an environmental awakening. People are starting to realise that maybe our methods of production and distribution, which we've had for decades now, aren't sustainable environmentally. (Craig)

> In the past 10 to 15 years there have been so many huge food scandals and scares that it has finally sunk in that a lot of the practices were completely unacceptable, and so now people are concerned about where does their food come from. (Margaret)

Paul and Stu both noted changing portrayals of eating discarded food. Paul reflected on the emerging use of the term 'freegan' to describe people salvaging much of their food and other goods from bins, a term he did not mind, but equally did not especially identify with:

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> It's just a little catchphrase to describe this growing … acceptability of being able to take things out of skips and reuse them and on the back, I think, of people being interested in sustainability and green issues. (Paul)

For Stu this had been one factor in his own initial exposure to skipping and one that helped in normalising an otherwise alien practice, alongside the more direct, and stronger, influence of people immediately connected to him:

> It was quite trendy at the time. It was quite a new thing that people had heard rumours of, and there was like documentaries about it and things on the TV and it was becoming more and more of a known thing. It just started becoming more and more acceptable. (Stu)

9.6 Value(s) and practices

Chapter 8 highlighted the role of value and values in structuring participants' performances of alternative consumption practices and, more broadly, their negotiations of multiple conduits for getting and getting rid of things. Different assessments as to the worth of things and the desirability of actions were implicated in the way people behaved, albeit not always directly and consciously.

In seeking to better understand how research participants came to engage in alternative practices, this chapter has also begun to shed light on how they were exposed to and adopted different schemes of valuation, especially through their upbringing. This final section draws attention to a further aspect of the relationship between value, values and practices: how engaging in new practices in turn impacted on the way participants made value judgements (broadly defined), suggesting a reciprocal relationship between what people do and what matters to them (Sayer, 2010; Hards, 2011).

Several participants made reference to how their involvement in reclamation practices had changed the way they think about or see things, further impacting on how they acted in other settings. Ali and Gemma, as discussed above in Section 9.5, had both become more inclined to give things away, or to try to recycle them, since using online reuse networks. Prior to this, Gemma 'wouldn't have thought it was worthwhile' taking individual items to a charity shop:

But now I will, because that one odd thing may come in handy; it may be what somebody wants. (Gemma)

Seemingly she had become more likely to see the potential value (to others) in things she no longer wanted. Fruit harvesters also noted changes in their appreciation of things. On the one hand, Marie had begun to pay more attention to the number of fruit trees in her surrounding area, reclassifying suburban gardens as potential sources of food: 'when you start looking you can just spot fruit trees from a mile off and you're like "ooh ooh ooh"'. In the same way, Marc explained that 'once you've got an eye for it, you just see them everywhere'. On the other hand, Sally's experiences of fruit harvesting – both her enjoyment of freshly picked produce and being prompted to think more about seasonality – had, she felt, made her less appreciative of the out-of-season fruit she used to buy, comparing strawberries bought in December to eating 'paper mache'.

Skippers described how their perspective on the discarded food they found changed with increased exposure. As shown in Chapter 8, part of salvaging food from bins involved discernment of what was worth taking and what was too old, damaged, messy or contaminated. Typically, the more experienced skippers became, the more food they found was considered to be edible. In Stu's words, 'you … get more liberal as time goes on'. Paul noted how, gradually, 'your barriers drop a bit and you can actually start dealing with something that's a bit more skanky'. For those who used skipping as a main source of food, a similar process made them increasingly likely to see a full bin as a bountiful supply of nourishment and less as a shocking indicator of wasteful retail practices:

We've kind of become dependent of it; we've become used to this as a resource … We open a bin and it's full of good stuff; you go 'ah fantastic', you know, and we've realised how your sort of ethics move and shift and we now depend on it. (Paul)

As well as coming to value things differently, some participants explained how their social values, ethical principles and political beliefs had been impacted through engagement in particular practices. Three particular examples stand out. First, Naomi felt that giving and receiving via reuse networks had changed her 'mindset':

I think it has changed the way I think and perceive things, and the way I react to things and respond. Definitely. (Naomi)

More specifically she felt she had begun to 'think a little bit more about community'. Going to pick things up had brought her into contact with a more diverse range of people and allowed her to see parts of the city that she would not otherwise have visited. In particular she described collecting a pram for her second child from a family living in a small bedsit:

I kind of thought he's giving something away but he really doesn't look like he's got a lot … It just made me think, you know, people use Freecycle even when they don't have anything, and I suppose … there are people that don't have a lot and it's great to be able to share across the community. (Naomi)

More generally, these experiences had prompted her to reflect more on the people around her and how she related to them:

I can now visualise [the city] as an entity, and the people within it. I have become more familiar; I'm more observant of the people in it, just because I guess I might think to myself I might have given to that person. I might have taken something from that person ... But yeah it just opens up my mind a little bit to sort of being more aware. (Naomi)

Second, as shown in Section 9.3, Pat was prompted to think more about the environmental consequences of waste, and consumption more broadly, through practical experiences, initially through the act of litter picking:

When you're out with a litter stick, on your own, in some distant place, you are able to reflect quite a lot and it makes you quite angry that that's there. And then with my reading, realising how much that's going to impact on the resources of the world. That's kind of scary. (Pat)

This chain of events eventually led to her helping set up a local online reuse group. She was explicit that, in the first instance, behaviour change preceded value change, both in her own experience and in trying to impact on others around her:

The behaviour change comes first and then the value system fits in with it afterwards … which is almost back to front, but I think that can happen … I think the best example really is me, because I really just

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didn't like the litter, and I didn't know that was going to lead on to thinking about consumerism and packaging and want and waste and stuff like that. But it has in a big way now.

I'm happy if people pick up litter, and then think about the packaging, and then think about consumerism, and start at that kind of level. (Pat)

Third, during an interview with Susan and Fraser I asked whether or not their involvement in online reuse could be seen as politically-motivated. Fraser said that the connection was 'the other way round'. Both felt their interest in social and environmental issues relating to waste had arisen and grown through their experiences of giving and receiving things, and of recycling unwanted materials, subsequently influencing their political participation, in this case meaning how they would vote in formal electoral processes:

Fraser: Because we do this we're attracted to political parties that espouse those views … We try and vote to encourage parties to do this. But that's more as a by-product than as an informative part of it.

Susan: Yes I think it kind of comes afterwards … I think Fraser is right, that it's a by-product rather than 'I am a green person therefore I am going to recycle'. I don't think you can really split the two so much. But for me it's definitely the recycling bit came first and then the small amount I have in politics, you know, voting every time, I try and vote in the kind of greener side of the spectrum.

Finally, the impact of practices on value and values was, in some cases, mediated by interpersonal relations. As Section 9.4 alluded to, engaging in a given practice often meant coming into regular contact and conversation with other people performing the same practice, some of whom were not previously known. This increased the chances of participants being prompted to think in different ways, question what had become self-evident categories and classifications, or perhaps in less conscious ways begin to be influenced by what other people valued and prioritised. As Stu put it, describing the 'like-minded' people he had met through urban fruit harvesting, 'the more you're exposed to something the more interest you take in it'. Craig noted how his own involvement in fruit harvesting impacted both on his wider consumption habits and on how he thought about need:

I mean I'm in more direct contact with people who are interested in sort of those … ideas that we've been discussing so far, and that has influenced the way I consume, and the way I even think about what it is I need. So yeah, I would say that my approach to other aspects of my life, other areas of consumption, are influenced by Abundance. (Craig)

It is beyond the scope of the present research to try to understand the mechanics of this apparent absorption of different ways of valuing; it is enough to show that participants felt they had been prompted to change how they perceived worth through their interactions with people they encountered in their engagement with alternative practices. These examples suggest direct contact with others and both intensity and duration of exposure were important factors. Others implied inevitability, that even those initially reluctant would, with time, be influenced:

The people that you meet along the way are often interested in all those things, so I think you have to be a bit blind to all of it, to not pick up any of it. (Amy)

Hanging around people that care about these things, I think eventually you can't avoid the green message (Pat).

9.7 Conclusions

This chapter has been concerned with the biographies of reclamation practitioners. I began by focusing on how their lives are generally marked by continuity. However, I was especially interested in the instances when this does not happen: when patterns are changed and new ones formed. Many participants were able to remember key moments of disruption that were influential in their coming to engage in alternative consumption practices. In some cases these involved changes in practical and material circumstances that led to the adoption of new ways of acquiring and disposing of goods, to meet particular needs that had arisen. In other cases, experiences and encounters caused participants to experience moments of reflexivity: previously unthinking and unquestioned activities became subject to discursive attention (see Wilk, 2009). Social networks were important in introducing participants to new practices, especially to skipping. Relationships played three important roles in recruitment: exposure, endorsement and demonstration.

As well as considering how participants became engaged in new practices it was crucial to consider how this engagement was (or was not) sustained. Where patterns of activity had become subject to questioning, becoming part of normal everyday life meant a process of forgetting. Practices became no longer worthy of attention, became unremarkable and ceased to need internal or external justification.

Finally, I drew attention to how, in becoming and remaining engaged in reclamation practices, participants began to value things differently. Conventional understandings hold that changing people's attitudes and/or providing them with improved information brings about behaviour change. My research, on the contrary, suggests that active participation in a practice, and regular interaction with fellow practitioners, can cultivate change in what matters to people, in turn impacting on their future actions.

In Chapter 10 I reflect back on the findings presented here, as well as those in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, and consider how they have helped contribute to knowledge in the five key areas identified in Chapters 3 and 4. I then think about the significance of these contributions outside of academia: how can they be applied practically?

Chapter ten: contributions, implications and applications

10.1 Introduction

In Chapters 6 to 9 I presented detailed analysis of my empirical data, structured according to a set of broad research questions that guided the primary investigation. In this chapter I change tack, moving between these four chapters, picking out and drawing together a number of key threads and in the process identifying the main contributions of the thesis. In Section 10.2 I consider each of the areas of intended contribution to ongoing academic debate, as set out in Chapters 3 and 4. I then move on, in Section 10.3, to briefly reflect on the potential implications and applications of the research to practice beyond academia.

10.2 Original contributions

I began the thesis by drawing lessons from the existing literature and identifying five areas to which, it is hoped, my research can contribute original insight. I now return to each of these areas of contribution in turn to summarise what the study has found and how it furthers understanding.

Understandings of three reclamation practices: free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping

At the simplest level, my intention in writing this thesis has been to create a record of three reclamation practices. I set out to document (albeit partially and in a specific spatial and temporal context) some of the pertinent distinguishing characteristics of giving and receiving via online reuse networks, collecting and redistributing unwanted fruit and salvaging discarded food from bins. This represents a contribution to knowledge in its own right since very little existing research looks in detail at these particular practices (see Chapter 3).

First, in Chapter 6, each of the three practices was defined and delimited (Schatzki, 2002) with respect to constituent elements brought together in performance: materials, competences and meanings (Shove et al., 2012). In doing so I established analytically – rather than taking as read – the key characteristics that make online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping

recognisable as practices, and that distinguish them from other, similar practices. Taking this simplified, stable model as a starting point, I then added further complexity by considering variation between performances of the same practice-as-entity (Warde, 2005a; 2013) and the continuities and connections, or 'overlap', between different practices (Schatzki, 2002: 87), emphasising the provisional nature of their stability and coherence as patterns of activity.

Second, I built on the existing evidence base by exploring in greater depth how people make sense of their engagement in reclamation practices. Where previous research does exist, it has tended to be limited to descriptive accounts of primary reasons for participation or focused on particular facets of engagement in isolation. As shown in Chapter 7, in-depth interviews revealed multifarious, complementary and at times competing narratives underpinning participants' engagements in online reuse, fruit harvesting and skipping. Among their immediate motivations they listed factors as diverse as cost-effectiveness; convenience; fun; improving social connectivity; reducing waste; and avoiding (the consequences of) problematic market practices.

Alongside critiques of consumerism often framed in similar terms to those introduced in Chapter 2 – especially relating to disposability, commodification, individualisation and the decline of community – were pragmatic concerns with eating, furnishing a home or clearing much needed space, anxieties about being a good provider for oneself or for loved ones, ethical entanglements with the plight of human/nonhuman others, and aesthetic or affective investments in the enjoyment and celebration of alternative ways of consuming. Interviews also revealed participants' understandings of the underlying significance of their consuming in particular ways. Using alternative channels was variously about meeting material needs, deriving emotional satisfaction, trying to do the right thing for its own sake or to make a difference in some way. Although some were clear as to which of the above were most important to them, typically participants would move between talking about different rationales without necessarily prioritising one over another. In many cases they appeared self-aware, conscious of the tensions between narratives, at least within the disruptive, discursive setting of the interview.

Beyond better understanding three particular reclamation practices and their practitioners' engagements with them, the research in this thesis contributes to a number of wider debates, to which attention now turns. It should be noted, however, that each of the following contributions *also* represents a further broadening or deepening of the evidence base specifically on online reuse, fruit harvesting and skipping, while it is the particular empirical context of these practices that helps shed new light on the more conceptual issues to be discussed.

Understanding the relationship between alternative and mainstream economic practices

As highlighted in Chapter 3, my research can be considered a contribution to ongoing efforts at documenting diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Specifically, I aimed to further question the distinction between alternative and mainstream economies (White and Williams, 2016).

First, there was evidence that research participants understood reclamation practices as meaningfully different from conventional ways of acquiring and disposing of things. In considering their motivations (Chapter 7), many were implicitly or explicitly pursuing something other than capitalist social relations and market exchange, or at least something differing from the prevailing version of these arrangements: the *alterity* of alternative ways of consuming was central. One dimension of this otherness related directly to the formal absence of money. Participants noted a redistributive potential to reclamation practices, democratising access to otherwise prohibitively expensive goods. Often they had benefited in this way themselves, especially through online reuse or skipping. Many (also) celebrated the opportunity to help those around them by giving things away, or by sharing the surplus from a fruit harvest or a prolific skipping trip. In this sense, alternative conduits were complementary to monetary exchange, mitigating its distributional failings.

There was another, more critical dimension to the otherness of alternative economies. Participants had misgivings about particular features of conventional economic spaces and framed their use of alternative channels as a response to these concerns. The overwhelming majority of participants, for

example, objected to what they considered the wastefulness of predominant patterns of acquiring, using and disposing, and the systems of provision in which they sit. Some saw reclamation as a means of reducing their harmful impact on the environment or of withdrawing support for exploitative business practices. A smaller subset of participants expressed more generalised opposition to prevailing economic arrangements, seeing capitalist relations of production as inherently and unavoidably wasteful or unjust – the rule rather than the exception – or lamenting free market individualism: alternative conduits were, in these instances, part of a wider ambition to foster mutually supportive communities built on interdependent relationships between people.

Second, to what extent can participants in reclamation practices be considered rational economic actors, as something approaching the instrumental utility maximisers taken for granted in neoclassical economics? A superficial look at the findings would suggest some evidence to support this idea. Many participants framed their use of alternative channels in economic terms, in the broad sense, in that it was about provisioning or meeting material needs. And more narrowly, these ways of acquiring and disposing were often seen as making the most efficient use of limited resources, especially money and time. Indeed, if participants had been restricted to giving one most important reason for their use of these particular alternative conduits, saving time or money might well have been prioritised. I did not require them to do so, but some comments were indicative to this effect.

However, as already seen above, discussion of these (narrowly) economic motivations was always accompanied by other concerns, from consideration of ecological and social impacts, to being more connected with other people or having fun. North and Nurse (2014) found SME owners to be concerned with profit maximisation, but at the same time they were morally engaged, curious, committed and enthusiastic about environmental sustainability. In the same way, participants in reclamation practices expressed a very real engagement with effective deployment of their resources and, simultaneously, showed concern for human and nonhuman others. These multiple engagements were marked by an unresolved tension, a source of unease for some participants. Moreover, even when considering narratives around cost effectiveness and

convenience in isolation, the evidence suggests that it would be wrong to consider them 'purely' about utility maximisation. Participants' desire to save money was bound up in notions of being a good provider, being thrifty, looking after oneself and one's family (Miller, 1998b).

Further insights into participants' status as rational economic actors, or otherwise, arose in considering their negotiation of multiple conduits for acquiring and disposing of goods (see Chapter 8). Especially illuminating was the question of when they decided to sell things (via eBay, classified listings or a car boot sale) rather than giving them away. Again, superficially at least, this appeared to take the shape of utility maximisation. When an item was considered to still have financial value it was seen, by some participants, as worthwhile trying to sell it. If it failed to sell then it might be moved down the hierarchy of available disposal channels and given away (Gregson et al., 2007b).

Closer inspection, though, demonstrated a highly complex, qualified and context-specific relationship with money that cannot be reduced to narrow understandings of economic rationality (White and Williams, 2010). Participants were more likely to sell under certain circumstances, for example when household finances were tight or when personally having spent a substantial sum of money on something. The same participants, under different circumstances – e.g. when relatively well-off, or had they received the item as a gift – would be more inclined to give it away, even if they felt it could be successfully sold. Furthermore, money raised through selling unwanted things was not always understood, straightforwardly, as money. With respect to the continual turnover of clothes and toys for growing children, some participants sold goods directly to fund replacing them. The money raised and expended never registered as part of the household budget, to potentially be spent elsewhere. For others, selling second hand things was seen as fun: the money made in a sale was a token of accomplishment rather than evaluated in terms of profit or loss.

Third, while the above discussion suggests that even monetary exchange is not 'purely' governed by economic logic (in the narrow, formalist sense), neither

should alternative consumption practices be considered 'purely' noncapitalist. Discussion in Chapter 8 suggested the continued influence of market value in the ostensibly moneyless economy of online reuse exchange. Alongside numerous other ways of attributing value to goods – including build quality, style, uniqueness, history, and so on – participants indicated that things that were deemed financially valuable were more likely to be in high demand when offered via reuse networks, attracting greater interest from potential recipients than other, less sought after items.

Analysis in Chapter 6, meanwhile, drew attention to a continued role played by class-based power relations in structuring differential access to goods in non-monetary exchange. As noted above in relation to the alterity of alternative conduits, excluding monetary criteria for allocating goods helped people to get things they could not otherwise afford. However, it also raised the question of how goods should instead be allocated, a source of concern for some participants in reuse groups. If recipients are chosen on a first come, first served basis, there is a risk of excluding people lacking continuous Internet access or their own means of transport, disproportionately likely to affect those with fewer material and cultural resources (White and Selwyn, 2013; Lucas, 2012). Alternatively, attempts to overcome this inequity by giving to the most 'polite' person, the one best able to articulate their need, or with whom the giver most readily identifies, might instead privilege certain valued forms of cultural capital, typically closely associated with possessing significant amounts of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). There was evidence, then, that alternative exchange mechanisms can both challenge and reproduce the inequalities associated with capitalist market exchange.

Understanding everyday life as political

A central concern throughout the study has been with everyday life and its political significance. My underlying interest is in the ordinary things that people do on a day-to-day basis and their implication in wider social change. In Chapter 3 I articulated a notion of *ordinary prefigurative politics* arising from existing literature, whereby daily life makes and remakes social relations, discourses and practices, and social change emerges from ordinary people

changing the way they think, talk and act (Holloway, 2002; 2010a; Gibson-Graham, 2006a; 2006b). In Chapter 4 I suggested theories of practice as a way of reconciling this performative understanding of reproduction and change with an acknowledgement of the persistence of existing patterns and arrangements (Warde, 2005a; Shove at al., 2012).

My empirical research adds three further insights, relating to: how participants narrate their own engagement in reclamation practices, in terms of its capacity to make a difference; their first-hand experiences of enacting change and its impact on those around them; and their stories of personal change, adopting new practices and cultivating different inclinations and abilities.

First, Chapter 7 focused on how research participants made sense of their engagement in reclamation practices. Especially pertinent are their reflections on the significance of their involvement (see Section 7.3). Most participants framed their engagement in terms of achieving practical ends (especially in online reuse and skipping) and/or experiencing satisfaction and enjoyment (especially in fruit harvesting and skipping). However, for many there was a simultaneous concern with doing the 'right thing', whether for the sake of moral congruence, to make a difference in the world, or both. The inseparability of meeting mundane needs and these ethical and political preoccupations speaks to the ordinariness of ordinary prefigurative politics.

Moreover, I asked participants to expand on their understandings of how everyday practices might lead to positive change. In Chapter 3 I distinguished between a widespread *political consumerist* conceptualisation of everyday political participation (Micheletti, 2003) and a set of alternative understandings that coalesce implicitly or explicitly around a notion of *prefigurative politics* (Boggs, 1977; Breines, 1980; Graeber, 2002; Franks, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Holloway, 2010a). Both narratives were common in my interviews and not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the one hand, participants understood that by using alternative channels for acquisition and disposal they were withdrawing demand (and therefore support) for objectionable business practices, as well as reducing their personal harmful impact on the environment. That said, given that success on these terms is measured *quantitatively*

(making a noticeable dent in profits, reducing the amount of waste going to landfill, etc.), few were optimistic about the difference made by their individual efforts or about achieving the necessary scale of support to register a worthwhile impact. On the other hand, participants frequently employed the imagery of prefigurative politics, albeit not in so many words. They spoke of social change beginning by changing the self, the effects of which were visible and would transmit to others immediately around them. There was an important discursive dimension – sharing with others; challenging assumptions about what is possible, which stifle hope and lead to fatalism and inactivity – to be achieved not only in conversation but through demonstrating practically (to themselves as well as to others) the viability of alternatives. Participants typically distanced themselves and their actions from what they understood to be politics or activism. For some these terms seemed too grand to describe something that was an ordinary part of their lives, or which was only secondarily about making a difference. For others associations with conventional forms of campaigning were tainted by tribalism and negativity; they were instead engaging in the positive, proactive business of forging different ways of relating and exchanging.

Second, participants gave detailed accounts of how this had played out in their own experience: how they had come to act in different ways and how this had impacted on other people around them (see Chapter 9). I return to these issues below, in considering how new practices become adopted and spread, a further contribution of the study. However, one point is worth brief reflection here. Interpersonal relationships had played an important role in introducing participants to new practices in the first place and were subsequently instrumental in their continued engagement (see also Cherry, 2006; Clarke et al., 2007b; Wheeler, 2012). In turn, participants exposed friends, family members, neighbours and colleagues to these newly adopted practices. Commonly this meant acting in an intermediary role, acquiring and disposing of things on others' behalf or, in the case of fruit harvesting and skipping, inviting them along to observe and participate. In some cases this peripheral participation continued indefinitely; for others it provided an opportunity to learn

in situ and eventually develop into a fully-fledged practitioner (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Bradbury and Middlemiss, 2015).

Third, interviews provided insight into what Gibson-Graham (2006b) term the politics of the subject. Over time, and not without conflict, participants' active engagement in alternative consumption practices – and integration in particular communities of practice – impacted on what was important to them, cultivating different ethical dispositions and habits of thought (Sayer, 2010; Hards, 2011), coming to value objects in new ways, and growing more inclined to act in other, more overtly political ways (Barnett et al., 2005a; Willis and Schor, 2012). Again, I return to this issue below in considering the relationship between value(s) and practices.

Understanding how new ways of doing things become adopted and spread (or don't…)

My research adds to a growing body of evidence employing a practice-oriented approach to understanding what people do and how that changes (see Chapter 4). First, in Chapter 6, I considered the biographies of free online reuse exchange, urban fruit harvesting and skipping *as practices*, including how they have spread from place to place. The migration of online reuse and urban fruit harvesting relied on groups or projects becoming established in new locations. Urban fruit harvesting was a particularly insightful case. Procedures and principles were communicated in abstract form, via a written manual, with relatively little interpersonal contact. Subsequently, each practice took root to a different extent in different places, depending on the local existence of other elements and practices (Shove and Pantzar, 2007; Shove et al., 2012). In particular, there were notable differences between urban and rural locations, worthy of further investigation.

Second, in Chapter 9, I turned attention to the lives of practitioners: how, over time, research participants came to be engaged in one or more reclamation practices and how that engagement has since been sustained or has receded. In general, people's lives were marked by continuity. Many participants reflected on the strong influence of their upbringing in setting the patterns for their later engagement in reclamation practices. They had, it would seem, acquired a set

of dispositions or orientations to acting in particular ways over others, not only by direct instruction but in seeing and doing, and in the context of a particular social, temporal and spatial setting (Bourdieu 1988; 1990; Lave and Wenger, 1991). In general, even when recruited to new practices, participants' stories were marked by continuity: 'new' practices were often related by shared elements with 'old' practices.

However, that continuity was from time to time disrupted, calling into question patterns of thought, action and representation that had previously been largely taken for granted, in a process which Wilk (2009) terms cultivation. In some cases, disruption simply entailed changes in circumstances which brought about new needs to acquire or dispose of things. Key examples included moving home, bereavement, separation, or a change in work circumstances. In other cases, disruption involved arresting routine patterns of thought. Participants could not always remember or articulate what had prompted these moments of reflexive clarity but could remember them happening. Others attributed it to particular events or interactions: a memorable conversation, seeing something in the media, witnessing a new practice, and so on.

As shown in Chapter 9, numerous processes were involved in practices becoming normalised into everyday life. Often this meant performing new practices in a particular way to ensure a good fit with existing practices. Conversely, existing practices were altered in light of the new ones adopted. In a reversal of the above process of cultivation – whereby existing routine actions became the subject of critical reflection – new practices became normalised, or naturalised (Wilk, 2009), as they were accommodated within the ongoing rhythms of everyday life and as they moved back towards being unthinking, unremarkable and no longer worthy of discussion. This happened especially when the new practices were supported, accepted and shared in by others within an immediate social network and beyond (Cherry, 2006).

This brings discussion back to the important role played by interpersonal relationships in recruitment to practices. Recruitment involved three overlapping processes of exposure, endorsement and demonstration: being introduced to the existence of the practice, reassured that a trusted friend or family member

approved of the practice and then shown, first-hand, both its viability and how to go about doing it.

Understanding the relationship between value(s) and practices

In Chapter 4 I introduced what Sayer (2013) observes to be a neglect of values in practice-oriented research, and a need for further research to consider (in a way consistent with a practice approach) the relationship between what people do and what matters to them.

Discussion in Chapter 8 suggests that judgements of worth structure the way people act. First, participants acted differently with respect to differently valued things, routinely using particular conduits to acquire or dispose of particular categories of objects (see also Gregson et al., 2007b). Even within online reuse goods were treated differently, for instance, based on the memories they carried or reflecting perceptions of their continuing usefulness, or otherwise. In fruit harvesting participants made judgements as to the quality of the fruit they picked and allocated it to different purposes as a result. Skippers exercised discernment over which items were worth salvaging and which were not.

Participants also talked about more intangible notions of value such as prioritising time. Some, for example, framed their use of alternative channels in terms of saving money, but further explained that their need to do so had arisen from the high worth they placed on time, having prioritised, say, experiences with the family or increasing their capacity to volunteer over earning and spending. Ethical engagements also impacted on how participants navigated between available courses of action. They frequently cited issues such as waste reduction, helping others in need, reducing their burden on the environment and building community in explaining their involvement in reclamation practices.

Tensions arose from the interactions between different ways of valuing things and experiences. In particular, financial and ethical considerations often came into conflict with each other, a source of considerable anxiety on the part of research participants. More detailed understanding of how these tensions are managed in practice would be an invaluable focus for future enquiry, as I discuss further in Chapter 11.

Finally, Chapter 9 presents evidence not only of how value(s) structured practice but also how practice impacted on valuation. Involvement in reclamation practices shaped participants' assessments of worth and their engagement with political and ethical issues (Sayer, 2010; Hards, 2011). For example, sustained engagement in online reuse exchange changed how some perceived the value of their unwanted things, making them more likely to recognise the benefit somebody else might derive from an item they no longer needed. Furthermore, in a reversal of the assumed causal link from increased information to changed behaviour, embodied practice opened individuals up to new ways of thinking about wider social issues which they could then supplement by pursuing more theoretical knowledge.

10.3 Implications and applications

In this final section I look beyond scholarly debate to reflect, albeit briefly, on how the insights raised by the thesis might be beneficial outside academia.

First, it is a useful source of evidence for the organisations and other actors involved in facilitating reclamation practices, especially relevant to networks of online reuse groups and the more loosely affiliated set of urban fruit harvesting initiatives. At the simplest level the research provides evidence as to why people get involved in these practices, how they come to do so and how they stay involved. This, I suggest, could be helpful to such organisations in planning their future activities and in seeking to foster wider and deeper engagement. The evidence also draws attention to unintended consequences of exchange mechanisms such as online reuse groups, especially the potential to privilege users with uninterrupted access to online communication tools and those with particular forms of cultural capital. Key organisers are aware of these issues and have begun to introduce measures to mitigate them. However, the nuance of the findings presented here – and the practice-oriented approach more broadly – might be beneficial in seeking to address these issues while anticipating any further problems likely to arise in response.

Second, although not directly designed for a policy audience, the study could be a helpful addition to the project driven by Shove (2010; 2014) and others to challenge dominant assumptions underlying governmental behaviour change

interventions. My research can be seen as a further example demonstrating the usefulness of practice-oriented approaches, especially in the less well researched policy area of waste management

Third, I hope that my evidence and analysis might be useful to activists, and would-be activists, seeking to prefiguratively enact a hoped-for world in the present. Analogously to Shove's application of theories of practice to government policy, I suggest that a practice orientation could be of value to an activist audience, providing a better understanding of how people change the way they act, conceptualising how varying performances are implicated in reproduction and innovation, and grappling with the continued persistence of prevailing patterns, which have the appearance of unshakeable social structures, without extinguishing the hope that they are only ever provisional and always subject to change.

Chapter eleven: conclusion

11.1 Summary of thesis

At the heart of this study is a concern with ordinary everyday life, radical social change and the relationship between the two. The research grew out of an interest in how day-to-day acts of consumption can be conceptualised as political, especially as a site for cultivating more convivial and mutually supportive social and economic spaces and for intervening in unjust and/or unsustainable relations with relatively distant human and nonhuman others.

I have explored this relationship by looking at ways of consuming that are intended to 'make a difference', at least to some extent, by some of their practitioners and some of the time. In contrast to work on political/ethical consumerism (see Chapter 3) I chose to concentrate on practices that operate ostensibly 'outside of' the formal market economy and that are enacted in opposition to some of the key perceived failings of a consumer society: that it is highly individualised, commodified and imbued with a throwaway culture (Chapters 2 and 7). The empirical focus of the study, then, was on three reclamation practices: giving and receiving goods free of charge via online reuse networks; collecting and redistributing unwanted fruit from public and private spaces; and reclaiming discarded food from supermarket bins.

I approached the research with three broad questions in mind. What are the key defining features of the three reclamation practices, their differences from and points of overlap with other practices? Why do people engage in these practices? And how did they come to be engaged in them? Following a practice-oriented approach (Chapter 4), the first of these questions emphasises the social lives of practices, while the second and third questions focus on the lives of their practitioners. Detailed analysis of findings with respect to these questions can be found in Chapters 6 to 9.

In Chapter 10 I brought together several themes emerging through the findings chapters to reflect on the key contributions to knowledge of the thesis. These can best be summarised by returning to two analytical framings of reclamation

introduced in Chapter 1: reclamation practices (1) as alternative consumption practices; and (2) as a form of ordinary prefigurative politics.

First, my research contributes to an ongoing project of deconstructing binary, capitalocentric representations of the economy (Gibson-Graham, 2008) by highlighting the messy, overlapping nature of 'alternative' and 'mainstream' economic practices. On the one hand, reclamation practices cannot be considered pure 'alternative' spaces, in that aspects of capitalist social relations and market valuations continued, in my participants' experience, to play a (problematic) role in how goods were exchanged and how people related to each other. On the other hand, even when saving money was a primary consideration, this was never in isolation from a series of less instrumental concerns, from caring for loved ones to reducing one's harmful impact on the planet. Moreover, when participants made use of other, monetary conduits for exchange, their relationship with money was not as straightforwardly utility maximising as one might expect.

Second, my research adds to understandings of everyday practices as potential expressions of ordinary prefigurative politics. Central to a prefigurative conception of the everyday as political, as well as to practice-based understandings of social change, is the idea that prevailing social arrangements, however persistent, only continue to exist through being successively reproduced in practice. By extension, they are subject to change by people acting differently. My research sheds light on how people come to act differently: how they engage in new practices, how this engagement is sustained and how it is navigated (relative to other potential courses of action) on a day-to-day basis. This was rarely a simple response to new information. Participants typically saw their involvement in new practices as a continuation and extension of what they had done previously, attributable to the dispositions acquired in upbringing. Introduction to new practices came about through interpersonal relationships, as well as being prompted by changes in material circumstances. Both were important in practices becoming established as a normal part of people's lives, as was a good fit with other ongoing commitments. Competing forms of value and values were negotiated in navigating between

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potential ways of acting. Conversely, ongoing practical engagement helped shape the ways people valued things.

From both of the above perspectives, the evidence calls into question the dominant representation of human actors as rational utility maximisers. In place of a detached, self-interested, calculating individual, my research participants were embodied, social practitioners.

11.2 Challenges and limitations

Having summarised the content of the thesis and its contributions to academic debate and beyond, it is worth reflecting on some of its limitations. These relate variously to the nature of doing postgraduate study, the design of the research and some specific elements that proved difficult in practice. I consider the issues faced and, where relevant, how they could be addressed if I were starting the study again.

Doctoral study is a unique opportunity in the course of a typical professional academic career to undertake genuinely exploratory research. Whereas grant applications or bids for contract research tend to require a tightly designed programme of study from the outset, postgraduate researchers are encouraged to spend at least the first year reflecting on and refining their approach, questions and methodology. Meanwhile the requirement to report findings on particular pre-agreed areas of (instrumental) importance is largely absent. A PhD is not only a programme of research, but also one of research training. It is a space to develop skills, understanding and interests, as well as to make a contribution to knowledge. Combined, these factors allow for a relatively open research design, giving the researcher freedom to follow where the data leads.

In my case this was a clear strength of the study, ensuring my research was responsive to participants' experiences and resulting in a rich and detailed qualitative dataset. Overarching research questions were kept intentionally broad and the interview topic guide evolved as the study progressed, taking into account emerging themes. However, there were also practical disadvantages to this approach. It was not the most efficient or consistent way to gather data in response to specific concerns. While numerous insightful and relevant themes

emerged from the research material, there were many other stories and reflections that, as the thesis began to take shape, turned out to be less directly relevant. As such, it was entirely appropriate for an exploratory, developmental study, but follow-up research might benefit from a more tightly specified design.

My research design was also ambitious in scale for a lone researcher. I chose to focus on three examples of reclamation practices where one might have sufficed. This reflected my primary interest in the *idea* of alternative consumption practices and their potential role in social change, rather than in any particular practice. By extension I conducted a relatively large total number of in-depth interviews to ensure I had a good number of participants within each practice cohort to explore internal variation in experiences. Again, this was a strength in that it yielded a robust and varied evidence base, but it posed problems in analysis. Transcription and coding were time consuming, while synthesising findings and constructing a coherent narrative was a lengthy, iterative, even attritional process. In addition, writing around three practices (with overlapping sets of participants) proved challenging and meant compromising the attention paid to each individual practice.

Other issues related to the specific methods used. In-depth interviews were, on the whole, successful. However, biographical elements relating to changing engagements with practices were reliant on memory and subject to participants' interpretations of past encounters in the light of subsequent experiences. A complementary approach to capturing change might have been to revisit participants repeatedly over an extended period to observe developments over time, especially with those new to particular practices. A smaller number of participants, but investing in more sustained engagement with each of them, might have helped facilitate this approach.

A particular challenge in carrying out participant observation was gaining access, specifically in arranging opportunities to accompany skippers on their trips to supermarket bins. When it worked, participant observation was invaluable in my learning about, and acclimatising to, reclamation practices, experiencing their 'doings' as well as their 'sayings'. It was, however, less useful in helping me understand how these practices were accommodated in the

rhythms of people's ongoing everyday lives – traditionally one of the great strengths of an ethnographic approach – given the episodic nature of my participation in isolated activities. As noted in Chapter 5, there are inherent difficulties with implementing a more embedded ethnographic approach with a narrow focus on these particular practices. Research participants were routinely engaged in reuse, fruit harvesting or skipping, but not necessarily very frequently or predictably: I could have spent a large amount of time observing their lives – potentially valuable in its own right – but without necessarily encountering the particular practices. A mixed approach of spending extended time with participants and more targeted participation in specific activities could have been fruitful. Again, having fewer participants, more deeply engaged with the research, could have been helpful in this respect, but would have placed a greater burden on the participants.

The study could have benefited from employing any of a range of participant-led methods. In a different context – at a one-off anti-austerity demonstration before the start of the fieldwork proper – I piloted the use of self-completion diaries. These accounts were successful in collecting multiple perspectives, as well as my own detailed participant observation, of the same event. I considered using a similar approach to capture participants' experiences of reclamation practices in, or close to, the moment. Another idea, sparked from a conversation with an early research participant about his intention to write a personal 'manifesto', was to commission participants to produce their own creative accounts of how or why they had come to be engaged in reclamation/alternative consumption practices and how they saw this as fitting into a wider (personal or social) narrative. These could be written in prose, but could also involve poetry, photography, film or illustration, drawing inspiration from Nathan Stephens Griffin's (2012a; 2012b; 2014) use of comics in biographical research into veganism and animal advocacy. In practice I chose not to use these methods, wary of the potentially unwieldy task of analysing the resulting data (alongside a programme of interviews and participant observation already in progress) and concerned about asking too much commitment of my participants. If I were to begin the research again, however, I would give greater consideration to using

such methods alongside interviews and more embedded ethnography with a smaller overall set of participants.

11.3 Avenues for further research

Finally, alongside its original contributions to knowledge, an important outcome of the thesis has been to highlight a number of promising areas for future research. First, the study has itself generated a large body of empirical material that could usefully be further explored. On the one hand, several themes emerged from the interviews that have only fleetingly made it into the final thesis, if at all. Examples include: participants' understandings and experiences of reciprocity and community in relation to giving and receiving unwanted things; their involvement in more overt forms of activism and how this relates to their use of alternative channels for acquisition and disposal; and reflections on the scalability of initiatives such as urban fruit harvesting groups, emphasising a preference for 'scaling out' (by spawning or inspiring multiple small, autonomous groups in neighbouring localities) over 'scaling up'. On the other hand, the online survey provides an unexpectedly broad, quantitative evidence base – as yet, largely untapped – on who participates in free online reuse, why they do so, and their overlapping engagement in multiple other practices. It is my intention to return to these sources and make fuller use of the insights they contain.

Second, my research has focused on experiences of reclamation in the UK, and predominantly in urban contexts. Discussion in Chapter 6 began to draw attention to the uneven geographies of engagement in alternative practices, highlighting variation in how practices 'take root' in different locations, especially pointing to differences in urban and rural settings. There was further evidence of subnational (north/south) and especially international variation, although this was based on a handful of cases where people had moved from place to place. Further research could look to expand on this comparative dimension, especially focusing on how and why practices take off to different extents, and take shape in varying ways, in different geographical contexts (see also Shove and Pantzar, 2007).

Third, theories of practice can be criticised for paying limited attention to value and values: to what matters to people and how this relates to their actions

(Sayer, 2013). My thesis has contributed to this debate by highlighting some of the different notions of worth that are negotiated when navigating between possible courses of action, as well as demonstrating how these criteria of evaluation are learnt through practice. Future research could usefully focus in much greater detail on the decision-making process as an empirical object of enquiry. In doing so it would be fruitful to explore the potential complementarity between practice approaches to understanding social change and work in economic sociology emphasising the study of valuation practices: how valuing is *done*, rather than what values people *have* (Muniesa et al., 2007; Stark, 2011). Such research could, again, consider both the lives of practices and the lives of their practitioners. Key questions, then, would include: (1) what these ways of valuing look like, how they have evolved, how they vary between different social contexts and interact with the numerous other practices they help facilitate; and (2) how valuation is experienced subjectively and how the ways in which people judge worth and navigate choices change over the course of their individual biographies.

And similarly, fourth, practice-oriented research could better accommodate ways of conceptualising power relations and inequalities (Shove and Spurling, 2013; Walker, 2013). Exploring power from a practice perspective might involve investigation into formal governance practices, as well as more broadly considering the roles of particular sets of influential actors in shaping any given practice. Attention could also be paid to the agency of elements, including the persistent influence of certain pervasive technologies, procedures or ideas in constituting multiple practices. Practice-oriented research into social inequalities implies thinking about unequal access to the material resources, skills and so on necessary for participation in a given practice. Walker (2013) proposes Amartya Sen's notion of 'capabilities', essentially resources directed towards specific ends or 'functionings', as a possible conceptual framing: 'some practitioners will be in a better position to enrol and integrate the materials, competences and meanings that constitute a given practice ... than others; in short they have more capability' (p.186). Here I have suggested Bourdieu's economic, cultural and social capitals, each only legitimated by the logic of specific fields of practice (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), as

another approach. Free online reuse, for instance, can be understood as a practice in which certain forms of economic and social capital valorised in other practices (money, or knowing the right people) are of decreased significance, but the need for certain types of cultural capital (computer skills, 'politeness') is brought to the fore. Future research could look to build on this by more systematically comparing the experiences of different subsets of practitioners and indeed non-practitioners.

In summary, my research has gone some way to improving understanding of the political potential of everyday consumption practices that goes beyond appealing to business interests via market transactions. In the process it has shed light on how practices emerge and evolve, and how they recruit and retain practitioners, adding to a large and growing body of practice-oriented research, but focused on particular forms of everyday change-oriented action to which theories of practice have less commonly been applied. It has further documented the pervasiveness of diverse economic practices, while problematising a clear distinction between 'alternatives' and the 'mainstream'. However, as the above discussion demonstrates, there are many opportunities to build on this research, both refining and extending its inevitably partial insights. It is to these avenues that I plan to turn my future research attention.

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Appendix 1: Interview topic guide

Note: The same basic topic guide was used for participants engaged in free online reuse, urban fruit harvesting and skipping. Small amendments were made to ensure questions were applicable to the practice(s) being discussed in a particular interview. Here I present the version used to discuss skipping.

BACKGROUND

1. First, can you tell me a bit about yourself?

- background/history
- what you do/things you're involved in
- what's important to you

SKIPPING

2. How did you originally hear about skipping, and how did you first get involved?

- when did you first go skipping? what were your first experiences of it like?
- did it take any getting used to? any fear, or aversion to mess/dirt? does it feel normal now to get things in that way?
- any previous experiences of giving items away/being given second hand items?

3. What do you like most about skipping?

- describe some positive experiences

4. Is there anything you dislike about it?

- any negative experiences? (e.g. staff/security/police, injuries?)

5. What are your main reasons for going skipping?

- most important reason; other reasons
- have your reasons changed?

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

6. Does going skipping make any difference to …? *[refer to any issues raised under reasons for going skipping, e.g. reducing waste]*

- in what ways do you want to make a difference? (e.g. social, environmental, community, helping people out, etc.)
- do you think it does make a difference? how could you see it potentially making a difference?

7. Has it made a difference in your life?

- e.g. improved your situation (free source of food/things)
- have you met people that you've stayed in touch with? if so, why?
- has it changed the way you think about anything? waste? money? 'stuff'? people? value?
- has it had a knock-on effect on other choices about what you buy? how you dispose of things? how you live? if so, any examples?

OTHER (ALTERNATIVE) CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

8. In my research I'm also looking at some other forms of alternative consumption practices. Do you ever do any of these?

- Abundance, picking fruit/foraging?
- Freegle/Freecycle?
- would you ever? why? why not?

9. What are the most important factors when you choose what to buy?

10. Do you ever make ethical choices about the things you buy?

- e.g. type of product, how it's been made/transported, where it's bought from?
- any examples?

ACTIVISM/POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

11. Do you consider yourself to be politically engaged?

- in what ways?

12. Do you see skipping as political in any way?

13. Have you been involved in any (other) forms of social, political or environmental action?

- ask for examples: issues and type of involvement
- campaigning; raising awareness; demonstrations/protests; local politics; community organisations?