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Frugality, normality, morality: wastefulness in consumption

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The empirical research

- Two qualitative interview based projects:
 - Those trying to live sustainable lifestyles
 - David Evans and Wokje Abrahamse
 - People who were open to environmental practices to different degrees
 - Defra funded research conducted by RESOLVE, Andrew Darnton and Paul Collingwood
- Neither intentionally set out to explore frugality.



Frugality and Thrift

- Frugality ≠ thrift (Evans, 2010).
- **THRIFT** is maximising financial resources; bargain hunting; deferment to maximise future spend; buying more with less. (Miller, 1998).
- **FRUGALITY** is restraint and moderation in consumption, use and waste; deferment of gratification for future goals; simplicity as opposed to luxury; making do with less (Lastovicka et al, 1999).

Thrift: remains an everyday day morality.

Frugality: antiquated, out of place in a consumer society, connotations of ascetic moralism.



F: You can't always only buy as much as you need because they keep giving you three for two.

M: You've got to be disciplined.

F2: Just buy one.

F: I don't mind some of the offers, because you are going to get to use them up, but otherwise if **I just get one it's going to cost me more money. But I do it because I don't want to waste food and throw it out.**

M: Well you are of an age who wouldn't waste food.

F: No.

M: I would say the older generation - we were brought up on rationing.

Theorising frugality

- People and practices *can be frugal*
- Constraint and restraint *frugality can result from both*
- Personal and systemic *frugality can be enacted and associated with individual stances and systemic traits*
- Individualistic and communitarian *frugality can be enacted for selfish and/or more altruistic reasons*
- Consumption and disposal *is frugality a consideration in for purchasing, use and disposal*
- Finances and resources *can both be considered by frugal consumers*



Frugal discourses

Fieldwork reveals certain similarities in the discourses of frugal consumers:

- Frugality is not normal
- Frugality is 'out of time'
- Frugality can be rationalised *even though it isn't normalised*



Norms and normality

- **Social norms** are shared ways of behaving subject to social punishment (e.g. Cialdini et al).
- **Normality** in social practices approaches suggests particular standards and conventions, routine and embodied actions (e.g. Shove, 2003; Warde, 2005).
- Competent and appropriate consumption is practically enacting activities according to existing norms, technologies and infrastructures.
- Frugality lies outside what passes for competent and appropriate consumption.



Norms and normality in recycling



Frugality as abnormality

- Kevin: *My friends always say how sort of frugal I am and I used to wonder why. Well I think I'm not. I mean I actually think people have been over-consuming for far too long.*
- Sarah: *Everybody teases me because everything, they say 'oh that's really nice, where did you get it from?' I say '£2.50' (laughter). [...] It's like I mean even when I buy shoes, which I know other people don't agree with, but I buy, I quite often buy second hand shoes.*
- David: *I used to get a lot of stick from my mates.*

Frugality as abnormality

Joseph: *I am actually socially conservative and I have very little affinity with some of the wackiness that goes along with being green but I do find it very funny that the way I am [...] how this gets seen as green. I mean, of course I care about the environment but I am not a 'wacky' green but the way I am is more acceptable or fashionable once it has that label [laughs].*



Frugality as out of time

- Kevin: *That's a bit **old-fashioned** these days isn't it? I'm always really amazed when I go into houses and I see people in the winter with the heating really high and they walk around in t-shirts. Now I know maybe that's quite comfortable, for me that's not sensible, but maybe it's because I'm mean. I don't know.*
- Alan: *I think it is just the **era** I grew up in.*
- Joseph: *And of course we are globalising more so apart from there being more stuff in the world, it is cheaper and I know that for many this is heaven...boom time...never had it so good. Pure happiness! I think it is awful and I know that this makes me odd, **old fashioned** or mean. Tight, my children call me.*

Rationalising frugality

- Kevin: *You know I don't like **huge bills**, you know, so I have relatively small bills for heating and lighting. I don't have a lot of lights on. I mean if I am down here I switch the lights off upstairs. And it is partly for conservation reasons, but also for reasons of frugality.*
- Alan: *Well you treat your finances like a business don't you? You weigh up the **benefits as opposed to the cost**.*
- David: *I wouldn't want to be a person that hasn't any stability. I suppose **financial instability** [is the one thing I would not want]. I could be single and have no problem with that, but not financial instability.*

Rationalising the morality of frugality

Sarah: *But I just think there is so much waste and like I say you have visions of these kids in other countries that are sitting there grafting or people working for a ridiculous wage and then we wear them two or three times and chuck them away. I just, it really sticks that does to be honest.*



Frugal practices and wastefulness


- Moderation in consumption less common; moderation in wastefulness occurred in many of the narratives of everyday practices.
- Wasting working items was not viewed as normal by many of the interviewees.
- Some consumers talked about hoarding old items.
 - reduction of conflict, denial of reality (Melamed et al, 1998).





Q: Do you think buying second hand is normal?

*Amy: No I don't actually. Things have become a lot cheaper, haven't they, to buy now. We tried, we had a huge television, you know, the big backed one. We could not give it away; nobody wanted it because they can buy the up to date gadgets for not an awful lot more money nowadays. And we had a sofa as well before we bought this one, **a lovely leather sofa** from the old house that we didn't want or need any more. Again, nobody wanted it. **We couldn't even give it to one of the sort of old people's homes. We went down all the routes of Surrey Exchange and stuff like that and nobody wanted it.***



F1 But the thing is, I think electronics especially, everything is getting bigger and better and more high spec and everything's just getting more obsolete a lot quicker, you know, a computer is out of date within a year.

F2 Yes.

F1 ..whereas beforehand it was a good 3 or 4 years. So you're getting all these computers stacking up. I've moved house and I've got 2 DVDs and a video sitting in my cupboard, just sitting there. **I don't know who to send them to to recycle, but I'm not going to throw them away.**

F2 **That's what I was just about to say. I tend to keep a lot of stuff because I don't want to throw them away, I do keep stuff.**

Thoughts

- Frugality is out of fashion in terms of normality and morality.
- A frugal consumer is not fulfilling her duty to the consumer society.
- But, conflicting expectations on citizen consumers; e.g waste less food for the sake of the environment, waste old cars for the sake of the economy.
- Spaces of hope
 - Seeds of change in conflicting [policy] expectations;
 - Frugality can be rationalised and whilst it lies outside of norms it *can* be legitimated and rendered acceptable *especially in light of environmental concern*;
 - Wastefulness is not fully normalised or seen as moral; frugality has an obvious but overlooked resonance with waste reduction.



Windows of opportunity

- Frugality needs to be valued alongside the cultural value of consumerism, so that it is not so abnormal.
 - Highlighting the waste and environmental angles of frugality may help make it more acceptable.
 - Environmental concerns may help foster a dynamic cultural change towards frugality (*in which it is normality, not marginal moralism*).
- Wastefulness needs to be prevented from becoming as normal as consumerism.
 - Structural solutions may need to be created that offer the same level of normality for frugal consumption and disposal as those which encourage unthinking wastefulness in terms of cost, cleanliness, convenience, comfort and collective action.

