Hoarders at home: Mental health meets material culture
Alex Miller

Introduction
Around 1.5% of adults hoard (Nordsletten et al., 2013) but our image of the hoarder is shallow at best (Herring, 2014). Pictures like Edie Beale’s (right) proliferate masking the reality of hoarders’ lives. This poster introduces my qualitative geography PhD research in which I foreground hoarders’ everyday practices and experiences and reject the medicalisation of difference. This contributes to literature dealing with the home lives of people with a mental health problem, works that present home as a productive achievement (Segrott and Doel, 2004), made meaningful through practices with objects (Tucker, 2010). Hoarding further complicates this; the home’s ambivalence as a storehouse of treasures which together cause distress emphasises its complexity and multiplicity.

What is hoarding?
For clinicians ‘the essential feature of hoarding disorder is persistent difficulties discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value’ (APA, 2013: p.248). It is diagnosed by interview and, uniquely, an assessment of home space, using the Clutter Image Rating Scale (below). I instead frame hoarding as a practice of material culture, positioning it in the context of thoughts, relationships and practices. It is about gifts bought and never given, souvenirs saved, books collected for ‘when I find the time’. Hoarding is a way of relating to objects, others and the self.

Researching Homes and Objects
My research draws on traditional and non-traditional methods to understand hoarders’ lifeworlds. It starts with an online open-ended questionnaire, advertised on hoarding support forums. 15-20 participants will then be recruited for further research which first involves an interview exploring hoarders’ relationships to and understandings of hoarding.

To explore the embodied and sensory realities of negotiating a house filled with clutter I have turned towards participant created video. Participants will film and narrate a tour of their homes, talking about their practices, their thoughts and their feelings. I will use this to draw out the sensory and affective elements of hoarders’ home lives, recognising the necessarily partial nature of this. Videos will be complemented with an interview discussing their production and thematic content.

Finally, I will explore hoarders’ relationships to objects. How I will do this is as yet undecided and will be developed during the project to reflect hoarders’ own practices and understandings.

References

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