Making community through the exchange of material objects

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# Making community through the exchange of material objects

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**Abstract:**

Classic community studies have identified several ways in which material exchanges lie at the heart of kinship relationships and informal networks of support in working-class communities. This paper re-examines some key emergent issues in light of social shifts that have occurred in East Manchester, a locality drastically reshaped by de-industrialisation and numerous phases of urban regeneration. The ethnography explores how a group of older women made community in these neighbourhoods, which they perceive to be fragmenting through their extended families and friendship networks. The women continued to engage in strategies to support and care for each other and sustain social ties through the exchange of material objects. The analysis suggests that theories of gift exchange and material culture offer useful resources to reinvigorate community studies literature, by identifying the ways in which gifts and objects remain central to sustaining kinship and friendship relationships.
Making community through the exchange of material objects

Introduction
This paper explores the ways in which relationships are formed and strengthened by a group of older women living in East Manchester, a site of rapid social change, including deindustrialisation and repeated waves of regeneration. Using ethnographic research, it focuses on the exchange of small items of food, the circulation of gifts, cards, presents and other small objects among the group, who met weekly at a coffee morning held at a community centre. The ethnography shows how even though working-class life takes on new and dynamic forms in localities undergoing rapid urban change in contemporary post-industrial life, kinship and family relations remain at the centre of community life. First, the discussion engages with anthropological work on the gift, which shows how material objects are used to sustain relationships and offers insight into how everyday social ties are sustained. Second, it examines classic community studies in Britain, which have repeatedly brought attention to the importance of female-centred kinship ties in working-class communities, revealing how they offer informal social support and protection against economic vulnerability (see for example, Bott, 1957; Firth, 1956; Ross, 1983; Young and Willmott, 1957). The paper argues that both areas of the literature offer valuable analytical tools for analysing informal networks of support, and should be brought together using theoretical approaches to material culture. The aim of the discussion is to update classic community studies and extend their analyses, showing how material objects provide helpful resources to cope with the ‘precarity’ (Skeggs, 2011) of working-class life. The ethnography makes an original contribution to the literature by drawing on theories of material culture which provide the analytical tools to understand why objects are deeply significant at moments of transition, like the death of a spouse or family member.

Material objects and gift exchange
The focus on material objects, gifts and reciprocity has a long history in anthropology. Writing in 1925, Mauss (2002) described how non-European cultures were characterised by systems of production and exchange, or what he described as ‘gift economies’. His analysis suggested that in clan-based societies gift-giving was linked to domination and control. Mauss’ influential work
explored how the gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged. He argued that the exchange of ‘inalienable things’ between persons creates a system of ‘reciprocal dependence’ (2002:62). In a class based society, where there is private property, a person has alienable rights over the things that they own, which means that there is a clear distinction between a thing and its owner (Gregory, 1982). However, in a clan based society, since there is no private property, people do not have alienable rights over things, so objects are never completely separable from the individuals who exchange them (Gregory, 1982). The motivating force behind exchanging objects, therefore, is not only that they are a manifestation of the collective but that they are a physical extension of the person. Gift exchange establishes a relationship between the subjects as the gift creates a debt which has to be repaid. As Gregory explains; ‘What a gift transactor desires is the personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates, and not the things themselves’ (1982:19). Since the work of Mauss, practices of giving gifts have been central to anthropological analysis, as exploring the meaning of material objects forms part of telling us about what it means to be human. Sykes (2005) provides a detailed review of the various strands in this literature. What is most significant for this discussion is how scholars studying capitalist, class based economies have become perplexed about the idea of the gift. It has been described as an ‘enigma’ which is at odds with the ideologies of capitalist accumulation (Sykes, 2005). This paper similarly asks why offering gifts continues to be a highly significant part of everyday life for older women living in East Manchester.

The influence of Mauss’s work lay in the way in which he took seriously the ‘primitive’ identification of aspects of personhood with the things he collectively described as ‘gifts’ (Henare et al.2007). Henare et al. (2007) explain how two strands of inquiry have developed within anthropology to explore these concepts. The epistemological approach maintains the division between concepts of ‘person’ and ‘things’ and, sees gifts as ‘inalienable objects’ (Gregory 1982). Following this approach, anthropologists such as Gregory (1982) have determined how a set of analytical concepts such as ‘things’ and ‘persons’ may relate to different ethnographic settings (in Henare et al., 2007:17). In contrast, the ontological approach regards the identification of ‘person’ and ‘thing’ as an act of
concept production (Henare et al., 2007:18). Most notably, Strathern’s (1988) *Gender of the Gift* explored questions about the nature of ‘persons’ in Papua New Guinea. Her work showed that epistemological approaches were insufficient to analyse the Melanesian case, as gifts are also regarded as ‘persons’. Strathern demonstrated that a gift represents a social relation rather than merely being a symbol of that relation, arguing: ‘When a gift instantiates a social relation rather than merely being a symbolic representation of that relation, it follows that Melanesian ‘persons’ can no longer be conceived as existing prior to relations in which they subsequently become implicated through exchange’ (in Henare et al., 2007:19). Strathern’s work extended Mauss’ analysis of the gift, and transformed understandings of personhood in anthropology, arguing that ideas about the ‘person’ should be understood as being contained in the relations that exchange entails. Her work convincingly demonstrates that material objects establish a dialogue with personhood, rather than being inalienable (Drazin and Frohlich, 2007).

Following Strathern, Henare and colleagues (2007) propose that instead of using terms such as ‘objects’ and ‘gifts’, a more open, heuristic approach should be taken, which allows ‘things’ to offer their own theoretical possibilities. They suggest an ontological approach in order to examine the meaning of gifts from their informants’ perspectives. Their contribution to the literature is primarily methodological, encouraging anthropologists to use a ‘recursive’ method, by drawing on their informants’ own ontological understandings of the world throughout the analysis (Henare et al., 2007:22). Similarly, in this paper, rather than seeking to problematise the various meanings of different types of gifts, my central concern is to explore how objects are used to constitute a variety of relationships in East Manchester. The ethnography explores why objects and gifts were instrumental in forming and maintaining ties for older women, both within and outside the family, in a context in which community was said to be fragmenting.

**The ethnography of East Manchester**

The paper draws on twelve months of residential ethnographic research which was carried out in 2010. I lived in Beswick in East Manchester in order to participate in the ‘local social worlds’ of existing residents (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1986). While carrying out fieldwork, I spent time with
a range of residents across social settings, who had lived in the locality for various lengths of time. I
developed a group of key informants, women, in their fifties to eighties, who socialised with each
other and met up regularly at a coffee morning held in a local community centre. They were white,
working-class and described themselves as ‘older’, ‘Mancunian’ and ‘local,’ meaning that they had
lived in the area for their entire lives. In its first year, the coffee morning was supported by
regeneration funding. After this funding ended, the women continued to run the group with donations
to cover the cost of buying refreshments. They were determined to keep the sessions running because
many places such as pubs, cafes, local shops, bingo halls and allotments, which had been the mainstay
of community life in the past, had closed down and socialising for older people had become restricted.
The sessions were organised by two volunteers, who, like themselves, were out of work and wanted a
place to socialise locally. Approximately eight to ten women attended the sessions and took part in
craft activities, such as card making or flower arranging, but for the majority of the time the members
mainly chatted to one another and drank cups of tea.

As I have argued elsewhere, longstanding residents made community, paradoxically, by sharing
narratives about the loss of social ties and nostalgic stories of the old ‘working-class’ community (see
Author, 2016). As an outsider to the area, the older women I met felt that it was important that I
should learn about their ‘local knowledge’. This was partly because they were concerned that, amid
the dramatic transformations which have taken place in the landscape, their history would disappear.

As a woman in her early twenties, without children or ‘life experience,’ the women regarded me as
naive and told me that there was a lot they could teach me. They were intrigued about my life and
asked me questions about my family. Also, what brought me to Manchester? Where was I living?
Throughout the fieldwork these older women provided access to a variety of places and also offered
guidance and reassurance. They enjoyed telling me about their experiences and were willing to
incorporate me into their social groups and responded to my interests seriously. The time we spent
together produced stimulating and exciting exchanges.

At places like the coffee morning, the women expressed feelings of similarity through their shared
sense of local identity. They also articulated a sense of common experience by talking about their
families. Even though the majority lived alone, as they were divorced or widowed, most had daily
contact with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who tended to live close by in neighbouring areas of East Manchester. The analysis explores how this group of older women sustained social ties in their extended families and with friends, in an urban environment in which they perceived community to be fragmenting. It describes how even though older women are often excluded from the labour market, they continued to play an important role in supporting their families, from their pensions or welfare support. These women, as Finch (1989) describes, are ‘kin keepers,’ with responsibility for sharing resources among members of their families as ‘active partners’ in structures of kinship support and social networks.

The ethnography reveals how relationships were formed and strengthened through the exchange of small items of food, the circulation of gifts, cards, presents, small objects and the lending of money among wider social networks of friends. The paper is structured as follows; first, I describe key studies in the community studies literature which demonstrate a long history of working-class women distributing material objects among kinship networks in order to protect themselves, and their families from economic hardship. Second, building on these studies, I discuss ethnographic examples from East Manchester which illustrate how women manage competing obligations and engage in ‘supportive sociality’ (Skeggs, 2011). Third, I describe how, gift giving is not always straightforward and does not always have positive outcomes which can test the limits of friendship. Lastly, I explore how in offering gifts to the dead, material objects can offer reassurance and stabilise relations at times of transition. The discussion reveals how practices of gift giving are used by women in order to cope with uncertainty, such as wider processes of social change, the regeneration of the physical landscape and the reconfiguration of social ties which occurs due to the loss of a relative. Although many older people talked about the demise of community, the ethnography explores how social networks have taken on new forms which continue to extend beyond the family and include a broader set of social relations.

**Historical accounts of informal networks in working-class communities**

This section describes some of the key studies in the literature which demonstrate that informal networks have been a central characteristic of working class life. In particular, anthropological and
sociological accounts of kinship in Britain reveal how duty and obligation define relationships, illustrating the role that women play in distributing material objects among family and non-family networks. Historically women relied on practical support to run the household and bring up children through exchanges with female kin. In a historical account of London in the 1880s, Ross (1983) suggested that women depended on reciprocal exchange in their neighbourhoods, playing an instrumental role in organising ties between households which supported working-class values and identities. Her study revealed how it was vital for women to sustain kinship relationships in order to secure material support and protect their own social status. In the 1880s, husbands and wives occupied separate domains due to the sexual division of labour. Since men often had unstable incomes, women had to rely on female relatives, neighbours or friends for material support.

From these observations, Ross (1983) argued that the skills of women were of equal importance to the husband’s wages in determining how comfortably off their families were and the types of relationships their households formed with neighbours. While some historical accounts depicted London’s working-classes as ‘generous’ and described women sharing ‘extensively and unsentimentally,’ Ross’s analysis convincingly demonstrates how exchanges were based on strict rules. Since there was no state support, the ‘safety net’ for most families was an informal network of women in the neighbourhood (Ross, 1983:8). A woman’s reputation, therefore, was determined by her participation in local systems of exchange. Being branded as untrustworthy was one of the worst accusations a woman could face as it could threaten a vital part of her family’s livelihood.

In post-war Britain, it was widely assumed across the social sciences that urbanisation and industrialisation would bring about social fragmentation, with only immediate family members continuing to have close relationships, and relying on one another for support. However, the work of Bott (1957), Firth (1956) and Young and Willmott (1957) challenged this assumption, showing that extended family ties continued to hold great significance in urban settings and remained the focal point of individuals’ social lives amid social change. Firth’s research, for example, demonstrated that even though ties varied greatly depending on family circumstances and personal selection, individuals depended on ‘pivotal kin’ for knowledge and communication (1956:62). He noted that while a high
degree of selectivity was common among families, kinship was defined by strong links between mothers and daughters which continued after the daughter married and had her own family. These studies have had an enduring legacy on contemporary sociological and anthropological community studies. They showed that despite the dynamic and changing character of kinship ties, the family has remained a central component of individuals’ lives amid major social and urban change.

My research in East Manchester is particularly influence by Young and Willmott’s (1957) classic study on community and urban change which examined the impact of the 1945 post-war slum clearance programme in Bethnal Green. Young and Willmott found that London County Council’s decision to move families to a newly built estate in the suburbs, Greenleigh, faced considerable opposition, as residents were reluctant to leave Bethnal Green, due to their attachments to their homes, community facilities and places of sociality such as the local pubs and markets. Most significantly, the study illustrated how residents did not want to move because they held a strong sense of belonging to Bethnal Green, rooted in their attachments to their extended families on whom they relied for support. The authors concluded that policy makers should regard belonging or community ‘spirit’ as a ‘social asset’ worth preserving and they should build houses around existing social groups rather than uprooting people (1957:166). Continuing these debates, my research examines how urban change is perceived to influence kinship ties, community and belonging.

Writing about the same area in London as Ross (1983), Young and Willmott (1957) found that the relationship between mother and daughter continued to play a central role in the organisation of the family after the Second World War. Even though the economic position of working families had become more stable in the 1950s, the daughter’s attachment to her mother was still central to social organisation. The authors described how in Bethnal Green, ‘insecurities and kinship were inextricably bound together’ (1957:159). Women exchanged knowledge, advice and childcare duties in their neighbourhoods and kinship networks. The influence of these studies has been profound, revealing, firstly, how micro-social relations are performed in day-to-day sociality. Secondly, identifying the centrality of informal networks in working-class communities where duties within the family have traditionally been gendered, with women taking on the burden of responsibility for sharing resources.
among the family. These accounts also showed how working-class communities prized not only their extended family groups but also a host of mutual-aid societies, saving clubs and informal networks for providing security through reciprocal support (Dench et al., 2006).

Strong continuities are evident between post-war community studies and my observations of networks of informal support in East Manchester, but the impact of de-industrialisation and its attendant social change as well as subsequent, repeated waves of urban regeneration have resulted in a common assertion that community is fragmenting and precarious. Rapid depopulation, mass unemployment and the demolition and redevelopment of large areas of terraced housing have reconfigured the basic units on which community life was built. The social spaces which were once important to people, such as the bingo halls, markets and community centres are thought to be disappearing and places like the coffee morning have become key sites for older people to meet. Since the post-war period, a number of studies have sought to examine the changing role of extended kinship and community in the context of deindustrialisation and urban regeneration (see for example, Dench et al., 2006; Edwards, 2000; Mollona, 2009). As the next section describes, this literature contains various inconsistencies about the significance of kinship ties amid major shifts in the physical and social fabric of community. These studies indicate how the social impacts of urban change are always specific to particular localities. Rather than attempting to reconcile their theoretical standpoints about whether the extended family continues to hold significance in post-industrial communities, this paper has a different aim. It seeks to explore how community is made and sustained through the exchange of material objects. Following the ontological approach outlined by Henare et al. (2007), the discussion explores the importance of ‘things’ as they are encountered in the field. It offers an alternative vantage point from which to explore the significance of social ties in an environment which is perceived to be fragmenting.

**Analysing kinship and community in post-industrial life**

In a follow up study of the Bethnal Green research conducted in the 1950s (Young and Willmott, 1957), Dench and colleagues (2006) found a number of dramatic social changes had taken place in the East End. In the 1950s, the community was made up of an ‘extraordinarily homogenous and stable but
also remarkably contained’ population (Dench et al., 2006:23). Belonging to the East End was rooted in lasting attachments to families and neighbours, but fifty years later the community was radically different. The authors noted that the East End was far more complex than the earlier study accounted for, with a fragmented population, including remnants of the old working-class, new and transient ‘yuppies’ and Bangladeshis. Residents’ social lives stretched over considerable distances and ‘the territory’ no longer contained the lives of its residents because the neighbourhood had become ‘the interface for a collection of overlapping universes’ (Dench et al., 2006:24). In the 1950s kinship ties cemented dense networks of informal support and feelings of belonging, whereas in the follow-up study, family ties ran counter to, rather than supporting, a sense of community. Dench et al. suggest that family ties compete with, rather than reinforce, neighbourliness because of the rapid population change in Bethnal Green.

Studies of post-industrial neighbourhoods in Britain have nevertheless shown that an enduring sense of connection to place is evident as residents articulate a sense of ‘born and bred’ belonging through idioms of kinship (Edwards, 2000). However, it is argued that kinship must be given further attention to explain how family relationships have shifted in light of social and urban change. For example, Mollona (2009) describes how Young and Willmott’s (1957) findings resonate with his own research in Sheffield over fifty years later where residents relied on networks of ‘nuclear’ or ‘extended’ family support. However, Mollona suggests that a more nuanced approach is required in order to examine informal networks in post-industrial Britain, than previous studies about kinship give credit to. While pointing to the continued importance of informal networks, he concludes that kinship is not a static characteristic of working-class life and that extended family connections do not offer a form of resistance against change.

Mollona criticises Young and Willmott’s account for replicating ‘essentialist assumptions’ and says that their work is guilty of ‘exoticising the working-class’ with depictions of timeless kinship and social patterns (2009:71). Mollona and Dench et al.’s studies reveal divergences in thinking on the significance of kinship and informal networks in post-industrial working-class communities. For Dench et al. (2006), urban change in London has resulted in kinship ties running counter to, rather than reinforcing, neighbourliness, while Mollona’s (2009) analysis of post-industrial Sheffield
suggests that the extended family connections continue to hold significance for working-class people, but are not static features of kinship. These ethnographies demonstrate how the impacts of urban change are always context specific. In the following analysis, I explore the significance of kinship ties and community in East Manchester by considering four ethnographic vignettes in detail which all revolve around material objects or gifts. The discussion focuses on material objects as they provide a new angle into questions of fragmented communities and the significance of the extended family and friends in providing informal support.

**Kinship, responsibility and lending money**

The majority of the women who met regularly at the coffee morning in Beswick received state benefits or pensions and tended to live alone. Even though they often found it difficult to ‘make ends meet’, they had a greater disposable income than other members of their family and distributed material resources among their families and friends. The women often lent their children and grandchildren money, and also gave them food or other small household items. For example, Nora, in her seventies, who lived alone in sheltered accommodation in Clayton was in daily contact with her five children, seven adult grandchildren and five great grandchildren. She told me that as long as she was able to pay her bills and do her weekly shopping, she would always help out her children as she could remember the difficulty of supporting a family. Nora lent her daughter money between pay days which meant she had to be careful when spending her weekly state pension. Normally Nora was an outspoken member of the group, often leading the joking and teasing with the other women. However, when we talked about the subject of lending money, she was much more reserved and often spoke in a hushed tone, so other members of the group could not hear. Some were critical of her family relying on her for support and felt that they she was being ‘taken advantage’ of, urging her not put her own finances at risk for the sake of her children. At the same time, Nora did not want the other women to know that she was in a position to lend money, as they might then make demands on her.

It is has been observed by Heath and Calvert (2014) that continuing dependency on family support has become a common feature of the lives of many young adults. With rising housing costs and restricted employment opportunities in the UK, younger generations have become increasingly reliant
on their families for material and financial support to offset the cost of living independently. Heath and Calvert found that whether money was considered to be a gift or loan was often blurred. Even though money would often start as a loan, in practice, it often turned into a gift, or vice-versa. Their work demonstrates that exchanges are not necessarily categorically fixed but are contingent on the shifting circumstances of both donors and recipients. My observations support Heath and Calvert’s (2014) argument, suggesting that for people from less affluent households who are less likely to have ready access to financial resources, engaging in complex negotiations over whether something is a gift or loan may be a luxury which they cannot afford. In addition, my findings show that lower-income women engage in complicated strategies with one another to manage the demands that are made of them by family members.

Grace, a widow in her seventies living alone in Clayton, who regularly attended the coffee morning, explained how she helped one of her neighbours to lend money. During the week, Grace’s neighbour stopped by her house for a cup of tea after working at the local primary school as a dinner lady. The neighbour’s adult son often borrowed money from her which put great strain on their relationship as he would often have to be reminded to pay her back. In order to make sure the son paid back the money, the neighbour told him that she had to borrow money from Grace to lend him. The son, who was embarrassed about owing a neighbour money, knocked on her door and gave Grace twenty pounds. Grace was happy to take on this role, as she knew how stressful lending money could be, if not paid back in time. In this case, Grace was fully aware of her role in the negotiation between mother and son, knowing that he would not expect a non-family member to transform a loan into a gift. This example shows how women use their wider social networks to manage the pressure of the family obligations that are placed on them. For these women, the pressures of being a mother did not end when a child left home. Rather, feelings of responsibility continued and the practices associated with mothering continued when their children were grown up, and were constantly negotiated with help from non-family members. Social settings such as the coffee morning have become important sites where women relied on a broader network for practical and emotional support as they managed competing obligations, to support themselves and their families, simultaneously.
Kinship relations, social class and urban change
The literature on post-industrial kinship ties contains various inconsistencies about their significance in contemporary life. According to Miller, (2007) family relations continue to be defined by rigid rules in Britain. Analysing sociological and anthropological studies of kinship in Britain, Miller suggests that too much emphasis has been placed on flexible practices and in doing so contemporary approaches fail to acknowledge the structures which guide kin relations (see for instance, Carsten, 2000). Miller’s argument follows that, in Britain, we live in a society with clear normative expectations, arguing that family roles ‘continue to matter a great deal’ (2007:551). In particular, Miller criticises Finch and Mason’s (2000) work on inheritance patterns which they describe as ‘negotiated relationships’. Instead, Miller contends that, despite the flexibility of laws and performance of kinship relationships, inheritance practices are almost entirely guided by fixed categories. His argument suggests that the meaning of kinship lies in its ‘highly formal and normative constituency’ (2007:541). Miller’s analysis draws attention to the ways in which expected roles define kinship practices and, yet, glosses over the importance of social class which is highlighted in community studies accounts of informal support networks in working-class communities (Firth, 1956; Bott, 1957; Young and Willmott, 1957). Building on these studies, my findings at the coffee morning suggest that the relationship between mothers and their offspring cannot be understood as normative and neither are they indicative of a ‘static working-class culture’ (Mollona, 2009) but are shaped by the resources which are available to these women and the context in which they live. As the example from Grace above shows, older women engage in strategies with their friends in order to manage the expectations of their children. I argue that theoretical approaches to material culture offer a useful resource to reinvigorate community studies literature, by attending to the ways in which gifts and objects remain at the centre of kinship and friendship relationships, which in turn, remain at the heart of community relations.

For women like Thelma, this meant having to weigh up her responsibility for the different needs of her children at the same time. Thelma, who was in her late fifties, arrived at one coffee morning session looking upset and exhausted. She was stressed and unable to sleep due to her children falling out over an incident in which some of her jewellery had gone missing. Thelma had nine children, the
two youngest still living at home. She did not work due to long-term health problems. One of her sons, who had been unemployed for some time, regularly visited her house to borrow money. Thelma helped out where possible but explained how in the past couple of months she had not been able to lend him money, as she felt that she should prioritise her two youngest children, who were still dependent on her. The week before, Thelma noticed that some of her jewellery had gone missing from her bedroom. Since there was no sign of forced entry she suspected that her son must have been to blame. At the coffee morning she sat quietly, evidently distressed and exhausted after spending two days looking round the pawnbroker shops in East Manchester to see if she could find the missing jewellery. Thelma told us that the jewellery had sentimental value, as it was given to her by her late father and described how the situation was causing great tension within the family, as her other children had stopped speaking to the son who was suspected of the theft. The women at the coffee morning reassured Thelma that the situation would soon become easier, offering advice and stories about their own experiences trying to support their children while dealing with economic hardship.

Instructive here is research conducted by Skeggs (2011) among young working-class women who rely on a system of ‘supportive sociality’ due to their position of economic precariousness. She explains how women have to learn how to ‘duck and dive’ as they try to protect each other against financial, physical and psychological strains that regularly threaten their lives (2011:504). Women look after each other and develop what Skeggs describes as, ‘localised spaces of protection’ (2011:504).

Exploring the meaning of class identity, Skeggs (2011) questions whether Bourdieu’s (1987) concept habitus offers an adequate framework to explore working-class personhood in post-industrial life. Contemporary theoretical approaches which have stemmed from Bourdieu’s work tend to be premised on the idea of the ‘singular self,’ which sees the working-class as deficient in value compared to the middle-classes. For Bourdieu, habitus draws on metaphors of capital which are rational, economic and calculative, which Skeggs suggests are insufficient, as they assume a particular idea of individualism which glosses over ‘historically grounded concepts of the self’ (2011:496). As the community studies literature has identified, duties within working class families have traditionally been gendered, with women taking on the burden of responsibility for sharing resources among the family. Conditions for
personhood therefore are not uniform, but come into effect through ‘regimes of value’ which have been ignored in theoretical approaches to the self.

In this critique, Skeggs (2011) re-examines notions of identity in order to understand how people who are considered to be on the margins, such as the working-classes, develop values. She concludes that the women she worked with were ‘non-propelling future accruing subjects with the wrong capital’ who could not access the fields of exchange to convert, accrue or generate value for themselves (2011:501). This led her to analyse subjectivity in an alternative way, emphasising that social values are always relational. My findings similarly indicate that we must take into consideration the strong sense of precariousness which defines the way in which people in post-industrial life construct subjective experiences and, importantly, relational ties. Rather than seeing kinship as a highly formal, normative structure following a rigid set of rules (Miller, 2007), it becomes evident that older women are engaged in strategies with one another in order to negotiate financial pressures and competing obligations. By exploring the negotiation of gifts and objects from my informants’ points of view, it is possible to reveal how kinship and friendship networks are contingent and shifting in East Manchester, relating to wider processes of social change. As the examples from the coffee morning reflect, women like Thelma and Grace engaged in various strategies in order to cope with the demands that their family members placed on them, by discussing their sense of duty and obligation with one another. The next section shows how the exchange of material gifts was not always straightforward and how practices of gift giving could also test the limits of friendship.

**Giving gifts and testing the limits of friendship**

On the evening of the 17th November Nora asked me to go to her flat to help her wrap up Christmas presents which she had bought for the other members of the coffee morning. Even though Christmas was still five weeks away, she wanted to be organised in advance, so she could check that none of the women had been missed out. Nora’s one bedroom flat was decorated with a tree in the corner of her living room adorned with glittering gold lights. Nora hated wrapping presents as her fingers were arthritic and felt clumsy when she used them, so she asked me to help her out. Sitting on her
comfortable chair, she gave me directions about which paper and gift tag to use for each present.

While I was wrapping, Nora explained why she had chosen each gift. There was a present for each member of the coffee morning. They were all quite different depending on her friendship with the recipient. Nora had bought new handbags for Thelma and for Grace to replace their old, faded leather ones. For her best friend and neighbour, Janine, Nora had chosen a watch from the Avon catalogue which had a square face framed by diamante stones. When the task was completed, Nora looked pleased and said that she was satisfied with her choices. It had taken her a number of months to save up money to buy the items and she was eager to see her friends’ reactions when they opened their gifts.

A few weeks later at the coffee morning at the beginning of December, Nora gave out the presents. Even though she would see the other women in the run up to Christmas, she wanted to give the presents out early so she could watch them open the presents. She could not hold back her excitement, smiling broadly as she handed out the parcels but after all of the preparations she had made, Nora was upset by her friends’ responses. The women opened the presents and thanked her but put the gifts into their bags and carried on with the usual routine of the coffee morning. For the rest of the session, Nora sat quietly, refusing to engage with the activities and discussions with the other women. The following week, I accompanied Nora to her flat, after we had been for a Christmas meal with the other members of the coffee morning. Looking slightly tearful, she said:

I wasn’t very impressed by the reaction to the presents. All that Thelma said was, ‘I can’t afford to buy you a present’. There wasn’t even a ‘thank you’. Nothing. I thought they were really ungrateful. Gail said that she didn’t have time to open hers, I thought, well that’s not very nice. At the meal, Grace didn’t bring her new handbag. She bought her usual scratty [scruffy] one. I said to Thelma, ‘will you use yours’? She said, ‘my daughter would like it’. I thought, ‘what a bloody waste’. When she said her daughter would have it I was fuming. Janine was happy with her watch, she wore it to the meal. I was glad she liked it. I’m not going to do it again, there’s no point.

Nora was upset by the women’s underwhelming responses to the presents. Thelma and Grace thanked Nora for the handbags but said that they would not use them. They later told me that they thought the
presents were ‘over the top’ and felt that they were inappropriate as they could not reciprocate such expensive gifts. Also, Grace and Thelma seemed to be offended by the implication that their existing bags needed to be replaced.

Caught up in the excitement of buying the presents or misreading the informal conventions surrounding exchange, Nora had not anticipated that her presents might cause offence. If someone is thought to have acted without tact or to have ‘gone overboard’ the present may be seen to be inappropriate. When an individual breaks the code of behaviour that has come to be expected, their actions can test a friendship. As well as bringing a great sense of support and reassurance, friendships can also be ‘ontologically unsettling’ (Smart et al., 2012). These incidents revealed how acts of giving and receiving are carefully negotiated and underpinned by shared values, which become all the more apparent when they are broken. Extending this analysis further, the final section explores how quotidian objects offer a symbolic way to cope with grief. Practices of gift giving were used by older women in order to sustain kinship ties and in social spaces like the coffee morning, which they felt were fast disappearing. At the same time, they were also used in order to cope with personal moments of transition. Following Strathern (1985) these findings show that material objects establish a dialogue with personhood, rather than being inalienable. Since a gift represents a social relation rather than merely being a symbol of that relation (Strathern, 1985), the women continue to offer objects to the deceased. Practices of gift giving remain a highly valued way of retaining a connection with the deceased sustain social ties in the present.

Material objects stabilise moments of transition
At one coffee morning session Grace, a widow in her seventies, sat quietly, slightly detached from the group. She was feeling ‘out of sorts’ as it would have been her late husband’s birthday. While the women offered their condolences Nora, one of the more outspoken women, remarked in a fairly upbeat tone, ‘happy birthday up there’ and asked whether she had written him a card. Grace replied that she had already wished him happy birthday when she woke up and put a card for him on the mantelpiece to mark the day. Such practices were commonplace among the women. They continued
traditions like writing birthday cards for the deceased which offered them a sense of comfort and a reminder of the memory of their deceased husbands.

It was twelve months since Grace’s husband had died. She continued to find his death difficult to come to terms with and could not bear to part with some of his belongings. Every time she left the house, she placed her hand on his coat which still hung next to the front door, but knew she should eventually get rid of it. Touching the coat was ‘a bit silly,’ but it offered her reassurance. Grace added that her widower neighbour carried out a similar routine. He kept his wife’s dressing gown hung across the banister and slippers at the bottom of the stairs, even though she had died six months before. Objects which were once the possessions of deceased family members remain in the ‘ebb and flow’ of everyday life and take on new meanings (Layne, 2003). The way in which women at the coffee morning talked about the deceased suggests that death is not regarded as a moment when social relations cease to exist, but a time where relationships are reconfigured through certain everyday objects that gain a new importance. Nora, for example, carried her late husband’s lighter in her purse, even though she did not smoke. These objects acted as sensory reminders of the deceased and also keep the memory of the loved one ever present in daily life as a public memorial to the dead signifying personal attempts to deal with grief.

After attending the coffee morning for a couple of weeks, I started to spend more time with Nora. She enjoyed having company and showing me around East Manchester. She invited me to her flat, which was in walking distance of the community centre in a complex of sheltered accommodation for the over 50s. In her lounge there were a number of photographs of her family; including her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Nora often changed the pictures around and modified the decorations on display, indicating how the lounge is where the public and private domains of the household meet and where the self is presented through objects. Nora drew my attention to one wall where there was a display of framed pictures of her grandson, Junior, who died from cancer, aged four, two years earlier. In Nora’s flat, such photographs were not only reminders of the deceased but also maintain complex imaginaries of what her ‘family’ consists of as they combine images of both the living and the dead (Davies, 2011). There were pictures of Junior’s family on his last holiday.
together to Disney Land and arranged on the shelf behind the sofa there were some toys and figurines of Mickey Mouse which they had bought back from their trip. Nora explained how she could sometimes hear the toys moving around on the shelf from her bedroom, which was next to the lounge when she was going to sleep. She believed that these noises were the sound of Junior coming back to her house to play with his toys. Rather than being scared or disturbed, the sounds brought her a sense of reassurance and comfort. She told me that she would never move from the flat or get rid of the toys, because she wanted Junior to know where she lived and be able to come and visit her.

One evening, I visited Nora at her flat and her neighbour, Janine who also attended the coffee morning, called round to see her. The women had only known each other for a short time but had developed a strong friendship. Nora and Janine lived in the same sheltered accommodation complex and could see each other’s flats from their windows. They spent time together every day and when they were not together, they often phoned each other to talk about what they were watching on television or to pass on news about their families. When Janine arrived, she walked straight into the kitchen and turned on the kettle. She had brought over a present for Nora’s family in a crumpled plastic bag, a knitted urn cover made in pastel shades of blue and pink. It had Junior’s name embroidered on the front and was designed in the shape of a t-shirt from soft wool. The gift evoked an emotional response. After looking inside the bag, Nora walked into the kitchen away from Janine and me. Fighting back tears she said, ‘don’t start me off crying, I’ve already been crying’. Looking up at a picture of her grandson on the wall and says, ‘look what you’re making us do!’

By giving Nora the gift, Janine offered a gesture of support to her family. She explained that she decided to order the urn cover from a magazine, rather than making it herself, as the stitching was too delicate for her to do neatly, adding, ‘it wasn’t cheap, mind’. By stressing the monetary value of the present, Janine indicated how she had to make savings in order to be able to afford the present. As Clarke (2013) writes, consumption and women’s engagement with specific forms of material culture should be placed at the forefront of understanding contemporary kinship practices. Women’s experiences as mothers are inescapably bound to specific worlds of objects, brands and goods. If we accept the enormous significance of ‘things’ in the practice of mothering, we must also take into
account the histories, trajectories and agencies of specific forms of material culture in the making of
social class power relations (Clarke, 2013:52). In America, Layne (2003) interviewed a number of
mothers who attempted to preserve the memory of stillborn children through physical objects. She
found that consumer goods were routinely employed as ‘technologies of memory’ by these women
and employed to address the problem of social pressure to forget (2003:209). My findings show how
material objects have multiple meanings, they can be used in order to sustain kinship relations, and
also create friendships in the present. Even though Janine had not known Nora when Junior was alive,
material objects offered a means for her to express a relationship with the deceased, and therefore to
offer her support to the family who were grieving. These observations about death rituals add to the
existing work on informal networks of support, showing how ‘kin keepers’ (Finch, 1989) offer cards
and gifts to dead relatives in order to stabilise moments of transition and to renew social relationships
among the living.

**Conclusion**
Revisiting classic community studies, this paper has explored informal networks of support among
older working-class women living in East Manchester. Strong continuities are evident between post-
war community studies and my observations of networks of informal support among this group,
showing that family ties continue to hold great significance in urban settings and remain the focal
point of individuals’ social lives amid social change (Firth, 1956; Bott, 1957; Young and Willmott
1957; Ross 1983). The ethnography also updates this existing literature showing that for older women
living in a community which they perceived to be fragmenting, extended family and friendship
networks remain highly significant, in order to cope with financial and social insecurity. But the
analysis shows that the relationships are not normative, they are dynamic, shifting and contingent.

By attending closely to these moments and following the ‘things’ (Henare et al., 2006) it is possible to
shed light on the constantly changing meaning of community among older women living in a site of
rapid social change. By taking an ethnographic approach, it is possible to examine the social relations
which matter to residents themselves. These are often mediated by things or objects. Using an
ontological approach, I have taken ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves
(Henare et al., 2006) in order to explore the significance of material objects for constituting social relationships. The ethnography shows how material gifts, including giving money to family members, offering presents to friends at Christmas and commemorative objects for the deceased have varied social meanings. They may reinforce kinship obligations, help to create new friendships, provide informal support or help individuals to cope at the moment of transition, such as the death of a loved one. At places like the coffee morning, women ‘looked out for each other’ and developed ‘localised spaces of protection’ (Skeggs, 2011:504) where they supported one another to sustain competing kinship obligations. These findings suggest that, in settings like the coffee morning, kinship relationships have taken on new forms which extend beyond the family and include a broader set of social relations. For example, Grace helped her neighbour by pretending to lend her son money and Janine bought a present for Nora’s family to commemorate the death of her grandson.

The literature on the significance of kinship in post-industrial life contains inconsistencies and theoretical divisions. Rather than seeing kinship as a highly formal, normative structure following a rigid set of rules (Miller, 2009), my findings reflect that older women engage in contingent strategies with one another in order to negotiate financial pressures and competing obligations. The ethnography reveals that social networks are formed and strengthened by older women, suggesting that the extended family takes on new and dynamic forms in localities undergoing rapid urban change. My observations support Mollona’s (2009) argument that family connections remain central to informal networks of support, but do not always offer a form of support or resistance against change. This is because in addition to providing support, kinship relationships carry obligations which may place older people in highly ambiguous or contested positions. In East Manchester, family and friendship networks continue to play a central role in community life, despite the commonly held argument that social life is fragmenting. The paper calls for a close focus on material culture exchanges as they can add a new perspective on working-class practices and forms of culture, drawing attention to the ways in which individuals living in precarious circumstances make and sustain community.
References


