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**Article:**
Beswick-Parsons, R., Evans, D.M. and Jackson, P. orcid.org/0000-0002-3654-1891 (2025) Reuse practices and household consumption work. Social & Cultural Geography. ISSN: 1464-9365

https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2025.2549709

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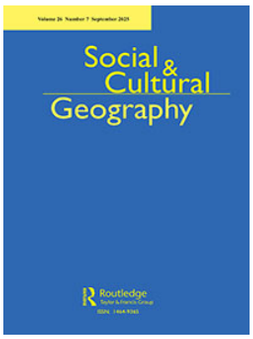

Social & Cultural Geography

ISSN: 1464-9365 (Print) 1470-1197 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rscg20

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**To cite this article:** Rorie Beswick-Parsons, David M. Evans & Peter Jackson (04 Sep 2025): Reuse practices and household consumption work, Social & Cultural Geography, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2025.2549709

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2025.2549709



Published online: 04 Sep 2025.

SOCIAL & CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY
https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2025.2549709

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# Reuse practices and household consumption work

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores practices of reuse – understood as an environmentally preferable alternative to single-use consumption – at the household level. Based on observations of everyday grocery consumption activities across both 'alternative' retail sites associated with the provisioning of reuse and more 'mainstream' outlets, we identify some specific practices – including *decanting*, *stock management* and *recirculating* – which we conceptualize as a form of 'consumption work'. Our analysis suggests that household practices of reuse are more prevalent and more varied than might be assumed in existing policy and related commentary. We conclude that future transitions to reuse might depend less on establishing new practices, driven by narratives of green consumerism. Rather, we suggest, greater attention should be paid to wider changes, including the transformation of supply chains to align with and facilitate the range of 'reuse work' currently observed within everyday domestic spaces.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 7 May 2024
Accepted 23 July 2025

**KEYWORDS**
Consumption work; circular economy; package-free shopping; reuse; household practices

**MOTS CLÉS**
travail de consommation; économie circulaire; commerce sans emballage; réutilisation; pratiques ménagères

**PALABRAS CLAVE**
Trabajo de consumo; economía circular; compras sin envases; reutilización; prácticas domésticas

## Prácticas de reutilización y trabajo de consumo doméstico

**RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article explore les pratiques de réutilisation – comprise comme une meilleure option durable par rapport à la consommation à usage unique – au niveau du foyer. Sur la base des observations des activités quotidiennes de consommation des courses à travers les sites de distribution 'alternative' associés avec la disposition de réutilisation, et des lieux de ventes plus 'traditionnels', nous identifions quelques pratiques spécifiques dont notamment le *transvasement*, la *gestion des stocks* et la *recirculation*, que nous conceptualisons comme une forme de 'travail de consommation'. Notre analyse suggère que les pratiques ménagères de réutilisation sont plus répandues et plus variées que ce à quoi l'on pourrait s'attendre par rapport aux politiques existantes et aux commentaires reliés. Nous concluons que les futures transitions vers la réutilisation pourrait dépendre moins de l'établissement de

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nouvelles pratiques, conduites par le discours du consumérisme vert. Plutôt, nous affirmons que plus d'attention devrait être portée aux changements structurels, y compris la transformation des chaînes d'approvisionnement pour suivre et faciliter le 'travail de consommation' actuellement observé quotidiennement dans les espaces domestiques.

## Introduction

With a growing emphasis on the 'Circular Economy' in debates on consumption, sustainability and everyday life, systems of reuse are increasingly attracting attention (for example (EMF, 2019), (Greenpeace, 2020)) in transforming 'production-consumption systems towards enhanced material circularity' (Greene et al., 2024, p. 1). For example, the UK Plastics Pact emphasizes the need for a series of technical and design-based solutions in 'eliminating problematic plastics' and 'creating a circular economy for plastics' (WRAP, n.d.). At the same time, there is a strong emphasis on 'hard hitting campaigns' that encourage citizens to 'recycle more of the right things' (WRAP, n.d.) and a widespread sense that consumers must 'do their bit' by, for example, switching from single-use plastics to reusable packaging.[1] Within social science work, the role of 'consumer-users' and the labour involved in achieving a more sustainable circular economy has been identified as a critical, but often overlooked, component of citizen participation (Greene et al., 2024; Hobson, 2020; Hobson et al., 2021). Hobson's work suggests that any successful transition towards a circular economy requires a shift beyond prevailing individualistic perspectives on consumer behaviour that have dominated policy approaches against the backdrop of technocratic changes (cf. Shove, 2010). This paper contributes to these debates, focusing on the dynamics of existing household consumption practices to better understand how these might enable or inhibit the development of systems of reuse.

To do so, we draw on the geographies of household sustainability and proceed from the assumption that the home, or household, is a site of interest in which 'expected, normal, mundane and ordinary' practices are often overlooked and in the background of policy (Waitt & Phillips, 2016, p. 361). This body of work brings together material geographies and cultural environmental research to explore *inter alia* the relationships involved in making 'the home' (Gibson et al., 2013); the connections between 'the household' and wider networks (Gibson et al., 2011); the trajectories of material objects through the home (Evans, 2018; Farbotko & Head, 2013); and the household tensions that may inhibit transitions to more sustainable practices (Head et al., 2013, 2016). Most notably, this work emphasizes that mundane everyday activities are labour intensive. For example, Collins and Stanes (2023) demonstrate how the practice of 'storage' requires remembering, planning, sorting, storing, unpacking, and reappraising. They also demonstrate that this involves iterative processes of ordering in choregraphing connections of care with which to achieve household sustainability. Extending these perspectives to the neglected aspects of reuse, we refer to consumption practices that engage with internal household relationships of coupling, care, support, and economic exchange (cf. Collins & Stanes, 2023; Mylan et al., 2016; Organo et al., 2013; Waitt et al., 2012).

Our analysis draws on Wheeler and Glucksmann's analysis of 'consumption work', which refers to the range of tasks required of consumers, before or after they consume, on which consumption itself is predicated (Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015a). Few goods or services are ever delivered 'complete' to individuals ready for consumption, with most requiring some form of activity on the part of consumers. For example, tasks such as building flat-pack furniture or installing software on a home computer illustrate forms of – often non-negotiable – labour required to complete and complement a variety of everyday consumption practices (Hobson et al., 2021). Our interest here is in the labour required to successfully perform practices of reuse, with respect to grocery shopping.

We advance our account of reuse through reference to an empirical study of people's engagement with plastics and other packaging materials. Given our theoretical orientation towards practice, we pay close attention to the 'doings and sayings' involved in people's consumption work (Schatzki, 1996). Where existing policy and commentary focuses narrowly on the (slow) uptake of reusable packaging,[2] we identify a range of everyday practices – such as *decanting* items before and after shopping, *managing stock* levels in the kitchen, and *recirculating* (identifying objects, washing up, storing, and constructing shopping lists) – and how these facilitate reuse. Further, we extend existing accounts of package-free shopping (for example, Fuentes et al., 2019) by studying not just households who shop at 'alternative' retail sites but also those who shop at more 'mainstream' outlets. Taken together, we suggest that household practices of reuse are more prevalent than might be assumed in existing policy approaches. We conclude by considering the wider contextual factors that would help to intensify and normalize these 'already existing' practices of reuse at scale.

## Literature review

Our analysis is informed by the concept of 'consumption work' (Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b) which builds on the 'total social organisation labour' approach developed by Glucksmann (1995, 2000, 2005). Wheeler and Glucksmann conceptualize consumption work as resting on a broader, multidimensional concept of 'socio-economic formations of labour' involving three dimensions of labour: *technical* – the division and allocation of labour in the form of tasks and skills to different kinds of people; *modal* – interdependencies of work across different socio-economic bases; and *processual* – connections of labour across the whole span of a process of production of goods or provision (Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b, pp. 35–36). The work consumers undertake conveys and depends on 'how goods and services are sold, how "complete" they are and on their potential uses' (Glucksmann, 2016, p. 881). It is important to note that not all work within the home constitutes consumption work, with some forms of 'domestic labour' being preoccupied with the reproduction of the home (Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b). The aim here is not to provide a categorical definition in separating the two – indeed, activities may be interpreted as both consumption work and domestic labour – but to highlight that the consumption work framework enables us to consider the division of labour and shifting boundaries of work undertaken across different socio-economic contexts. Examples of technological innovations that save labour in the retail sector, such as self-service shopping, automated checkouts, and hand-held scanners, also rely on additional labour from shoppers (Bulmer et al., 2018; Dujarier, 2016; Kjellberg et al., 2019), whilst the use of ready meals and other forms of convenience food are examples of

labour from unpaid domestic work transferring to paid work in food factories and retail outlets (Glucksmann, 2005, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Warde, 1999).

Within the context of household waste management practices, economies of consumer recycling remain a predominant focus in household work. Through a variety of recycling tasks and activities including cleaning, squashing, disassembling, sorting, storing, and transporting items, Wheeler and Glucksmann (2015a) highlight the interdependencies of such work within the home, with work tasks conducted by other waste management actors/technologies (see also Chappells & Shove, 1999; Middha & Horne, 2024). Seldom recognized as 'work', but rather portrayed as 'a conscious green act' (Oates & McDonald, 2006, p. 421), recycling activities are often enacted through a moral economy of resource stewardship and environmental citizenship. They are also, however, embedded within relations of familial care, conventions of household order in keeping one's house tidy, norms of cleanliness and hygiene, and conveniences more generally (Pedersen & Manhice, 2020; Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b). Contributions such as Lindsay and colleagues on consumption work in low waste households, not only emphasize debates about sustainability and transition to a circular economy failing to recognize the amount of additional labour often required, but also the gender disparity in enacting this (Lindsay et al., 2024). They draw to attention the inclusion of 'sustainability labour' as part of existing household dynamics and gendered practices (see also Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015a), in attempts to reduce plastic consumption involving new and additional modes of shopping and relying on other domestic activities, such as meal planning. These ideas build on earlier work by Organo, Head and Waitt, who found that women spent more time on sustainable practices than men and did so more often (Organo et al., 2013). Referring to waste management in apartment living, Horne et al. (2022) refer to the temporalities and rhythms of plastic waste being intensified due to space requirements, or lack thereof, with practices of sorting, recycling, and disposing of plastic waste important in maintaining household hygiene, convenience, and emotions of living in apartment spaces.

Recent literature on the development of package-free shopping, of which systems of reuse are a part (e.g. Beitzen-Heineke et al., 2017; De Temmerman et al., 2023; Fuentes et al., 2019; Kemper et al., 2024; Louis et al., 2021; Rapp et al., 2017), has focused principally on the retail-consumption interface, highlighting the material rearrangement of stores and the competencies that consumers must develop to successfully negotiate this new mode of shopping (Fuentes et al., 2019).

It is often argued that practices of reuse are less convenient and more demanding for consumers (Zeiss, 2018), requiring more planning and consideration of which bags, jars and other receptacles are needed (Fuentes et al., 2019). Accepting that consumption is a process that reaches far beyond the act of shopping, it may also require additional effort in preparing food items when back at home (Kemper et al., 2024); having to rethink or expand storage spaces to accommodate multiple containers (WRAP, 2022); and needing to clean containers thoroughly to avoid potential food safety risks in store (Beitzen-Heineke et al., 2017). Yet despite the acknowledgement of these actions, there has been limited research on exploring these activities, unpacking their role, and understanding their potential significance in facilitating circular economy transformations. As such, we extend these perspectives by looking beyond 'shopping' – and the attendant focus on reusable packaging – to explore a range of other domestic practices associated with practices of reuse. In this, our research contributes to the research agenda proposed by Hobson et al. (2021), addressing the questions of who

undertakes consumption work, to what ends, and how its multiple forms are coordinated within the household.

## Methodology

This paper explores the diversity of practices associated with reuse at the household level. Rather than focusing only on those who are committed to package-free shopping, we also include those with less, or no, experience of reuse, in order to understand domestic labour activities which may align with existing practices of reuse – including those that may not be captured by dominant policy framings. In exploring how reuse work is practically accomplished by participants, our fieldwork attended to a range of tasks and activities prior, during, and after the acquisition of items/products. In doing so, we explored the presence of 'reuse work' already embedded in everyday life and, consequently, the similarities of both 'formal' performances of reuse – when engaging with official systems of reuse – and 'informal' performances of domestic labour – which may escape the gaze of environmental policy.

We adopted a qualitative approach to our study, with participants recruited via social media (targeting sustainability groups and local community groups), in-store posters at an independent refill store, and convenience sampling. An initial survey captured participants' shopping behaviours related to recycling and reuse, with an opt-in for further engagement. Of 70 survey respondents, 39 expressed an interest, and 14 agreed to further engagement in the research. Table 1 provides details of participant recruitment method, location, and reuse experience. Of these, 8 regularly shop at a local refill store; 2 have tried a refill store recently or in the recent past; and 4 have not shopped at a refill store before. It would be disingenuous to suggest that participants can be easily categorized as 'reuse shoppers' or 'single-use shoppers'. For example, participants who are committed to shopping at refill stores also supplemented their shopping for everyday goods (e.g. food, personal care, and home care goods) with trips to other retail spaces such as supermarkets (see Kemper et al., 2024), mixing and matching their shopping practices depending on the facilities available to them at the time.

To understand the true scale of reuse within the UK is complex to say the least, with reliable tools to measure the scale of reuse only recently formalized (see EMF, 2024).

**Table 1.** Participant overview.

| Pseudonym | Recruitment method | Location | Reuse experience |
|---|---|---|---|
| Colin and Florence | Social media post | Yorkshire | Tried reuse recently/in past |
| Jason and Jessica | Social media post | Yorkshire | Not shopped at a refill store |
| Rosie | Social media post | Yorkshire | Not shopped at a refill store |
| Harriet | Social media post | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| Abigail | In-store advertising | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| Emma | In-store advertising | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| David and Susan | In-store advertising | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| Rachael | In-store advertising | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| Charlotte and Jeremy | In-store advertising | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| John and Hannah | In-store advertising | Yorkshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| Paul | Social media post | Lincolnshire | Tried reuse recently/in past |
| Mary | Social media post | Lincolnshire | Regularly shop at a reuse store |
| Sophie and Michael | Convenience sampling | Lincolnshire | Not shopped at a refill store |
| Deirdre | Convenience sampling | Lincolnshire | Not shopped at a refill store |

Systems of reuse are often differentiated in terms of packaging 'ownership' between user sourced and owned containers (reuse-refill) and brand/retailer owned (reuse-return) provisioning methods (EMF, 2019). From a system of provisions and everyday material arrangements context (see Greene et al., 2024), access to reuse in the UK is primarily facilitated through a network of independent retail institutions – often referred to as zero-waste, refill, or unpackaged stores – or part of a store that also sells health related and ethically sourced products (reuse-refill). With respect to more mainstream provisioning practices, retailers have tentatively engaged at a limited scale. Several retailers have trialled 'reuse zones' (see Tesco, 2022; WRAP, 2022), while online retailers have also engaged with reuse-return options across a selection of goods (see Abel & Cole, 2025; GoUnpackaged, 2024). Yet, these trials have often ended due to 'operational and commercial issues and current consumer barriers' (Conway, 2024). More broadly, there are also notable examples of reuse-refill branded products (for example, homecare goods), some of which may arguably fall short of recent design standards for reuse (see EMF, 2024).

Our methodology was informed by previous studies of household consumption, sustainability, and the performance of practices[3] (see Beitzen-Heineke et al., 2017; Evans, 2014; Kemper et al., 2024; Martens, 2012). In addition to semi-structured interviews and diary activities, we sought to 'thicken' these 'talk-based' methods through activities such as kitchen tours and object-centred interviewing. Further, we adopted a range of observational techniques such as accompanying participants on food shopping trips (both reuse and conventional), travelling to and from the shop; unpacking shopping; writing shopping lists; completing a 'Click and Collect' shop online; washing-up; and refilling containers. These methods enabled us to capture the combination of observation and talk, surfacing the potentially taken for granted aspects of reuse as they unfolded. Although this paper does not claim universality or generalizability of our findings, moving beyond the limits of self-reported behaviour to uncover unassumed reuse practices highlights the potential underestimation of existing behaviours essential to advancing a circular economy.

The fieldwork was conducted between November 2021 and July 2022. Engagement with participants involved an initial meeting either over the phone or briefly in person to talk through the research project, answer any queries, confirm participation and (written) consent, and organize the next steps. Across the 14 households, ten households engaged three times; and four engaged twice. Each encounter ranged from 45 min to three and a half hours. Seven households completed a supplementary diary activity. Seven concluding interviews were conducted face-to-face, in the participants' homes, whilst two were conducted online. This concluding discussion utilized a mix of standardized predetermined open-ended questions, as well as several follow-up questions that arose from the previous encounters and/or the diary activity. This offered an opportunity to reflect on their participation and explain in further detail any points that were raised in previous encounters. Each household received a £50 gift voucher upon completion.

The material was analysed using NVivo software, with coding tasks guided by the research's main aims of identifying other required consumption work activities associated with practices of reuse at the household level, and to consider who undertakes this work, to what ends, and how its multiple forms are coordinated within the household. In doing so, the analysis of the material was informed more generally by a social practice approach, with respect to identifying materials, competencies, and meanings (Shove et al., 2012)

associated with practices of reuse. The data analysis also identified other practices and engagements with enacting sustainability within the household's everyday life – including recycling, researching whether to purchase alternative forms of energy (solar panels and ground source heat pumps), gardening, and composting. Though not discussed here, we acknowledge the breadth and inter-connection of sustainable consumption practices enacted throughout the home.

## Findings

The following presentation of the empirical findings from our fieldwork is divided into three sections, starting with an analysis of *decanting* practices before moving on to a discussion of *stock management* and *recirculating*. Although these practices are described in separate sections, the analysis shows the interconnections between them, whilst also conveying the replication and reconfiguration of existing everyday routines, the significance of which is highlighted in the conclusion.

As has been conceptualized in detail elsewhere (see Fuentes et al., 2019), reuseable packaging systems require the reconfiguration and subsequent reinvention of shopping practices. With the removal of packaging and the requirement of engaging in the practice of refilling in store, Fuentes et al. refer to the reframing of shopping, the re-skilling of consumers, and the re-materialization of the store. However, in what follows, we present a series of activities and tasks that are required so that practices of reuse can be situated within everyday life. In referencing more mainstream shopping practices and household contexts, we argue that this form of consumption work is not novel, but rather constitutes a formalization of pre-existing domestic labour undertaken by consumers to enable systems of reuse.

### *Decanting*

Our analysis suggests that the practice of refilling is not necessarily a streamlined replenishment process, in which items are refilled in-store, stored at home, and consumed in its entirety once more. To do so, we draw attention to the household activity of *decanting* goods from containers (and packaging). We observe this processual form of labour being undertaken both pre and post shopping, households negotiating shopping practices so that they do not require the need to *decant*, as well as the observation of *decanting* in households shopping at mainstream supermarkets.

Highlighting the requirement set by reuse-refill stores for containers used to be clean and dry, for health and hygiene reasons, and to prevent possible contamination, in circumstances where participants wish to use the same container they use at home in store, we note *decanting* happening prior to shopping. This includes 'draining off the last dregs' (Abigail) of haircare and homecare cleaning products into small glass jars (see Figure 1) or transferring left-over herbs into an egg cup prior to going shopping (John and Hannah).

Practices of *decanting* after shopping are associated with the use of 'transit packaging' requiring additional reuse work in the home. Here we refer to alternative, often lighter, plastic containers used when shopping in-store and the contents transferred into primary containers once back at home. Abigail, regularly uses paper bags to transport items

**Figure 1.** Dishwasher liquid draining on the windowsill prior to shopping [photograph: Abigail].

between the store and home, due to the weight of the jars she uses at home, something which had become even more pertinent due to a recent shoulder injury.

> Abigail: I tend, I probably tend not to take jars as much as I take paper bags. And the pure reason for that is I usually walk to [suburb] and jars are heavy before you've even got anything in them. And if I'm carrying back quite a lot of shopping from [refill store name] it's lighter if I've been able to put it in paper. So that's rather logistical reason rather than ethical or any other reason. But no, I mean I would use, obviously I, well I would use flour, granola, erm rice, beans, you know anything like that I would put in paper bags.

Other participants refer to the use of alternative objects other than shopping bags – for example, a pushchair, a hiking bag or a personal shopping cart, to successfully carry and transport heavier items back home (see Hagberg, 2016). For example, Hannah, transports heavier containers by using a pushchair. However, at times where she has several glass jars to transport, she relies on the brown paper bags – which are supplied by the refill store, generally as a last resort – and subsequently *decants* items when back at home.

Shopping in a refill store does not necessarily mean that *decanting* is a prerequisite, however. For example, Charlotte mimics conventional methods of shopping in maintaining a rotation of the same product. Having multiple jars and containers 'on the go' avoids mixing items bought at different times and allows them to replenish one container whilst having another in the pantry already in use. As such, the continual rotation of two containers allows the household to refill stock without running out. Another participant, Emma, explains that she visits the store less regularly – generally every month – so that

she has an ample amount of time to consume staple items, so that jars and containers are empty and ready to be refilled.

> Interviewer: So when, thinking through when it comes to fill that up again . . .
>
> Emma: Yeah, probably next month, it takes a while because I probably only use a handful at a time. Next month that'll be empty, so I'll go and get a load of seeds . . . because I've worked out, if I go once a month and fill things up, it usually lasts out.

Noting that households mix trips between both refill stores and other retail spaces, we still observe the continued participation in *decanting* goods from single-use packaging, when back at home. For example, John regularly shops at his local refill store, but he also describes the ease of shopping at a supermarket with his children as it provides a level of comfort and convenience in being able to 'mindlessly wander round getting everything they need at whatever time they like'. For certain products, he explains how he substitutes the requirement of *refilling* at a reuse store, with *decanting* when back at home. In doing so, John demonstrates how reuse work can be displaced from a public space (the refill store) – where refilling is a requirement and therefore formalized activity – to a private space (his home) – where *decanting* items from single-use packaging is arguably not required and therefore an informal activity of domestic labour within the home (cf. Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b).

For those households who shop at conventional supermarkets, we also note them participating in *decanting* practices once back at home. Whilst conventional shopping practices – involving single-use packaging – generally require rotating stock in kitchen cupboards by drawing older items to the front and placing newer items at the back, we noticed *decanting* tasks when bringing stock into use and transferring it out of its single-use packaging and into Tupperware containers or Kilner jars. For Colin and Florence, the benefit of condensing packs of ingredients they regularly use for making bread and cakes means that they can organize their pantry more efficiently and stack Tupperware containers on top of one another on the windowsill (see Figure 2). Whilst for Sophie, the inclusion of containers storing dried goods such as pasta, rice, flour etc. in a larder were seen as both an aspirational choice so that her kitchen is 'beautifully set out', and a functional driver with the container 'having an excellent seal on it', thus keeping items fresh. For these households, *decanting* products were not associated to broader moral economies of resource stewardship and environmental citizenship, but rather, more individual and immediate consideration of the functional use of their kitchen space – including the aspirational aesthetics of it looking clean and tidy – as well as maintaining the quality of food items once opened (cf. Liu et al., 2019).

Whilst it is suggested that sustainable activities within the home are an unequally gendered practice, with women undertaking more labour due to their role as mothers and household managers (Organo et al., 2013; Waitt et al., 2012), we note *decanting* being practiced by men and women alike. While we do not suggest *decanting* is a particularly gendered practice, we do acknowledge that the activity connects to existing relationships within the home that are generally conducted by a particular individual. For example, for Colin and Florence, since his retirement, Colin has done all the shopping. Subsequently, Colin ties *decanting* in with the more general activity of packing items away after a shop. Whereas for Sophie and Michael, and David and Susan, although both couples regularly


**Figure 2.** Colin and Florence's pantry [photograph: Beswick-Parsons, R.].

shared shopping duties, both Sophie and David took on the responsibility of unpacking the shop and any subsequent *decanting* activities.

This section (on *decanting*) moves from the site of purchase to the domestic setting where most of the consumption work of reuse takes place. The work of *decanting* includes physical (embodied) labour, the majority of which in our observational work was undertaken by both men and women. Within a reuse-refill context, *decanting* involves the creative reuse of objects, some of which were designed for other purposes, and combinations of different objects – both plastic and otherwise – for use in store and at home. We note the use of plastic options fashioned out of polypropylene, such as takeaway containers and Tupperware. In contrast to single use plastics, or even 'soft' reusable plastics (such as sandwich bags), polypropylene is well suited to practices of reuse. In addition to durability, the size and shape of these containers have the benefit of being nested inside one another for the purposes of storage and transportation. They are also amendable to being cleaned by virtue of being hard wearing and heat resistant and offer further aesthetic benefits in the context of home interiors.

## *Managing surplus stock*

While shopping at a refill store provides the opportunity to control the amount purchased (Beitzen-Heineke et al., 2017), in practice we observe how the need to use transit containers and *decant* at home can create *surplus stock*. This in turn requires additional domestic labour at another time in managing stock levels.

In certain contexts, we observe households purposefully purchasing products that result in *surplus stock*. Here we refer to bulk purchasing in *managing stock* levels at home. Like the use of transit containers, some households utilize a larger container,

several times the quantity of the primary container when *refilling* in store. Stored at home and *decanted* into the primary container when empty or near empty, bulk purchasing purposefully results in generating *surplus stock*, to manage the rhythm of shopping and household consumption routines. For example, Harriet purchases several of her cleaning products (e.g. washing up liquid and laundry soap) and bathroom products (e.g. shampoo, conditioner and shower gel) in 5 litre containers from her refill shop. Being able to store these in the cupboards underneath her kitchen and bathroom sinks enables her to *decant* what she needs, when she needs, without the risk of running out and having to go to the shop and refill. Despite this, though, Harriet admits that there are times when she runs out of one item in the primary container and forgets to refill the bottle, despite having sufficient stock in the cupboard. Such instances often trigger a 'spree' in which she refills bottles in the bathroom, irrespective of how empty they are.

Like *decanting*, stock management involves a range of objects fashioned from a range of materials that betray the straightforward invocation to switch from 'single use' to 'reusable' packaging. Further, the management of surplus stock is also evident in the routines of those who shop at mainstream supermarkets, with items transferred from single-use packaging into more favoured objects that are stored in cupboards or on the countertop. For example, Jessica's preference is to use a Homepride container (1 kg) and *decant* other – cheaper – packets of flour (1.5 kg) into this, creating a surplus which is stored in its original packaging behind the container in the cupboard. Similarly, we observe Paul empty half of the ground coffee packet into a coffee jar on the countertop, whilst storing the surplus in a more stylish branded coffee container in the cupboard above. It is useful to note here, that we use the term 'surplus' with respect to the physical capacity – or volumetric constraint (Cochoy, 2008) – of preferred objects and containers producing *surplus stock*. This will require transferring again in the future, as opposed to food items being surplus to requirement due to the mismatch between infrastructure of provisioning food and household consumption routines (see Evans, 2014).

*Stock management* practices, including the *management of surplus stock*, fell to both men and women in our observational work. Management practices are coordinated with the rhythms of other household tasks, and like *decanting*, this activity occurs among those who engage in conventional supermarket shopping as well as among those who are more committed to shopping in stores that are specifically dedicated to reuse. As such, we suggest that this does not necessarily involve new forms of labour for the individual to resolve at home, but rather, reflects more commonly observed limitations in negotiating the rhythm of shopping and household consumption routines.

## *Recirculating*

*Recirculating* alludes to consumption work that is coordinated as part of other, more commonly identified, domestic activities, and therefore its association to reuse may go unnoticed. Acknowledging that reuse-refill provisioning systems require customers to use their own containers that are clean and dry to successfully engage and purchase products, we note the *modal* and *processual* nature of this work (as discussed by Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b). We distinguish four key phases of work associated with *recirculation*: first, objects are *identified* as suitable for reuse; second, they are

*prepared* for reuse through an ongoing process of being cleaned and readied; third, they are *stored and managed* ready for use; and fourth, they are *mobilised* in shopping preparations.

We observe a variety of ways in which objects – both plastic and otherwise – are accumulated and through which participants come to *identify* containers of value, including holding onto packaging for a potential use and actively purchasing items based on their reuse value when shopping. Noting a 'custodian behaviour' and resistance to engaging in a throwaway culture (Cherrier, 2010) – even if this is responsibly recycling containers once used – individuals such as Mary refer to retaining items, with jars and containers 'hanging around' in the home whilst considering the potential avenues of future use. For David, it is when he supplements his shopping at the refill store with visits to the supermarket that he finds 'perfectly suitable single-use packaging' that can be reused. This same practice is also exhibited by households who do not frequent refill stores, who actively acquire items based on the functional benefits of the container after its initial consumption.

> Rosie: We don't eat that much ice cream these days. So I actually have started buying the Cornish ice cream partly because it's a bit nicer but because it also comes in a decent box that I can then reuse. These are really good boxes.

With items regularly *identified*, participants take stock, organize, and evaluate which containers remain of value and which ones are no longer required. Whilst functional characteristics are considered an important aspect in retaining objects for reuse (Rapp et al., 2017) – and repurposing more generally – those who are committed to reuse may see value where others don't. We note, again, that plastic containers fashioned out polypropylene (in this case ice cream tubs) are consistently employed in practice of reuse. Looking beyond plastics, for example, Sophie, explains that she has an 'unhealthy obsession with Bonne Maman', a jam brand, and enjoys the aesthetical look, retaining them for further use within the home, whilst acknowledging that all other glass jars would simply be recycled. By contrast, Mary's knowledge of the current recycling infrastructure in her local authority and the limited acceptance of certain items and materials informs the prioritization of objects which are to be recirculated in the home.

> Interviewer: And what, and are there any tubs or items that don't make it into the cupboard now, or do you find you put less into the cupboard now because it's full?
>
> Mary: Yeah, I think I try to just sort of be a bit more logical and think do I really need to use this one again, if it's say like a humous tub because it's all fully recyclable that can go in the recycling bin, whereas something like the Coconut Collaborative they've got black plastic lids, they claim it's recyclable, it's just coloured black but I know our recycling won't take it so that will get reused until there's no life left in it, so yeah it's just trying to be a bit more pragmatic about it and say right I can use that, that can definitely recycle so let's put that in the bin.

This continual evaluation of objects for recirculation within and outside the home exhibits considerable knowledge and understanding around the potential continued life of an object after its initial consumption.

Noting the similarities between repurposing containers and jars as part of more general household work and identifying them for performances of reuse, these nevertheless reflect separate practices of domestic labour and consumption work respectively

(Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b). These analytical distinctions may go unremarked upon by consumers, but they are nevertheless potentially useful in demonstrating that certain practices of reuse do not involve big changes in behaviour.

In many cases, containers are regularly *prepared* for reuse by being enrolled in existing everyday practices such as washing-up, in which containers accumulate with other kitchen utensils, plates and bowls as well as packaging that is destined for recycling. Participants regularly highlighted certain containers as suitable for the dishwasher whilst other objects are required to be washed by hand. For Sophie, sending her Tupperware containers through the washing machine each time the product has been fully used exhibits 'good hygiene practice'. Whereas the physical limitation of Rachael's kitchen means that she does not have space for a dishwasher. Unperturbed by this and perceived notions of washing up requiring the water to be at a high temperature with concentrated detergent, she suggests that she will just 'wash everything together [as] life's too short'. Whilst refill shops are required to satisfy regulatory standards in using clean containers on grounds of cleanliness and hygiene, consumers *prepare* containers based on more pragmatic rules-of-thumb, such as those outlined by Rachael and Emma:

> Emma: Yeah, I just refill it. I mean some of them, it needs to be cleanly to take it to the shop. Also, I'm quite mindful, if I've taken it to the shop and I haven't cleaned it, I don't touch the shop, if that make sense. Like, when I'm filling things, I'm conscious, you've got to do the infection control as well because of Covid. So, there is an element where you do need to clean things regularly, but what I do is make sure I'm not touching their, erm, what's it called, their facilities and not making contact with it. Because once you've put your funnel on and you fill it up, you've put that [the funnel] away, it's [the dispenser] not touched the jar has it. And if I'm scooping and filling things up, I'm not touching.

Noting the modal structure of reuse-refill systems, this work is subsequently situated within the domains of the household (and therefore unpaid work) and aligns with pre-existing washing practices, relying on pre-existing knowledge and competencies of what they perceive to be clean and hygienic.

*Storing and managing* containers take up considerable room within the home. Among those who shop at refill stores, pantries and cupboards – along with excess stock in cellars and garages – are given over to storing these objects with individuals nesting, stacking, and ordering them to maintain some degree of order among those containers in (re-) circulation. Just as other research on the sustainability of household consumption emphasizes (Collins & Stanes, 2023; Lindsay et al., 2024), we are keen to highlight the labour this demands in the curation of containers, and the role relationships within the household play in maintaining practices of reuse and participation within families. For John, the responsibility of maintaining order among circulating items is generally taken on by himself to alleviate the demand of reuse work on his wife, Hannah, in the hope of maintaining her engagement.

> John: So yeah, you've got the kind of Tupperware that's, these sorts of things are kind of easier access, so if Hannah just wants to grab a Tupperware [growling noise, referring to her having a stressful and busy day] she can easy just grab it and, and it's all there. So, frustration is down, engagement is up, erm . . . Erm, and so it's, so again it's about trying to arrange things where hopefully it will be more, you know, it will be easier to engage with, with people who, who are very clever but who have low patience, not naming any names.

Similar to this, households who do not shop at refill stores exhibit similar spaces and objects, which are tied more generally to domestic labour activities and household routines relating to norms of household management, such as portioning meal leftovers in previously bought takeaway containers, freezing allotment produce in ice cream tubs and storing Allen keys and grass fertilizer in glass jars (Rosie and Sophie).

The requirement of remembering bags, jars and other containers is often noted as a key barrier in facilitating more sustainable actions when shopping at refill stores (Fuentes et al., 2019; Rapp et al., 2017), and shopping in general (WRAP, 2021). To help with this, we observe households who shop at refill stores *mobilising* containers by including them in planning-to-shop activities. Whilst Kemper et al. (2024) refer to writing careful lists in advance of shopping as off-putting, despite the pro-environmental end goal providing strong motivation to do so, Evans (2014) suggests that households – irrespective of their environmental credentials – already do a good deal of planning with respect to food provisioning. For those who use a refill store, we note the incorporation of empty containers into the activity of writing a shopping list, or in some cases, as a substitute for it. For example, next to her notepad and pencil in the pantry, Charlotte has a red bag that she uses to carry her jars to the refill store. When she has used what is left of something in a jar, she updates the list and adds the jar to the bag. The bag then acts as a visual cue to go shopping when it becomes full. Similarly, for Emma and Hannah, placing empty containers on the side or in a particular basket functions as a visual reminder for what they need from the refill store.

> Emma: Basically, that's where the bottles that I am using to reuse go there [in a basket in the utility room, near to the recycling] ready and it also means that I just look at it and go, 'oh, I need to go to [shop] because they're all empty'. So, it becomes, it's an obvious prompt isn't it.

In summary, we observe that recirculation involves a 'bundle' of interconnected practices (*identification, preparation, storage and mobilisation*). Whilst this entails an increasing amount of preparatory work on the part of the individual prior to, and in between, shopping trips, we suggest that such tasks are to some extent coherently coordinated with existing domestic routines in the home, most notably, in the form of sorting waste and recycling, washing-up, and writing shopping lists. These practices have complex temporal dynamics, and, among our households, the work was undertaken by both men and women. Decisions taken in the home relate to consumers' knowledge of practices that take place beyond the home (such as the way current recycling infrastructure is configured). Notions of cleanliness and hygiene are combined with more pragmatic considerations such as available storage space or facilities for cleaning and washing up. Our participants also engaged in subtle manoeuvres, designed to reconcile the demands of planning with the desire for convenience involving the coordination of different tasks within and beyond the home.

## Conclusion

Based on our empirical work with 14 UK households, we have identified specific practices associated with household-level reuse, in the form of *decanting, managing stock*, and *recirculating* that facilitate participation in systems of reuse. Our analysis of these makes

four main contributions: proving a case for nuanced reading of materiality and plastics; expanding understandings of what constitutes reuse at the household level; providing evidence of the domestic division of labour in terms who carries out specific reuse practices; and highlighting the nature of the 'consumption work' involved in carrying out domestic practices of reuse. We deal with each of these in turn.

First, we have drawn attention to the range of materials – plastic and otherwise – that are embedded in practices of reuse. We have shown that the appropriation of different containers for the purposes of decanting, managing excess stock, and recirculating is shaped by functional and aesthetic concerns. Crucially, we have highlighted that some plastics, specifically, polypropylene are particularly prevalent. This lends support to the idea that the blanket condemnation of plastics should be avoided in context of efforts to address the specific challenges associated with 'single use' plastics. Adopting a material geographies approach serves as a reminder that not all plastics are equal (see Evans et al., 2020).

Second, whilst existing accounts of package-free shopping have focused principally on the retail-consumption interface, we have explored a range of other domestic practices associated with reuse. In doing so, we join recent geographical debates surrounding household sustainability, everyday consumption, and the material culture of the home to enhance our understanding of the household consumption practices that are involved in enacting the circular economy. These practices are often invisible both to those who carry them out and to environmental policymakers – precisely because they may not be considered as 'reuse' in the formal, narrow, sense of shopping at refill stores using 'reusable' containers. We also draw attention to the additional domestic labour (*stock management*) associated with shopping at refill stores, which reflects more commonly observed limitations in negotiating the rhythm of shopping and household consumption routines. While practices, such as refilling, are more-or-less specific to dedicated systems of reuse (e.g. refill in store), we highlight those practices of *decanting*, *stock management*, and *recirculating* can also be observed in relation to conventional supermarket-based consumption and related domestic labour routines. It follows that such practices, commonly observed within the private domain of the home, serve as an integral part of the successful functioning of macro-economic systems (Hobson et al., 2021). The association between reuse practices and broader domestic labour activities suggests that concerns amongst policy makers and commentators about the 'slow uptake' of reusable packaging may be overstated and premised on the potential underestimation of existing behaviours essential to advancing a circular economy. Accepting that not all informal labour is 'exploitative' (Hobson et al., 2021), we suggest that opportunities for transitioning to a more circular economy might be found within existing configurations of consumption and economy as well as in the reconfiguration of shopping practices (cf. Fuentes et al., 2019).

Third, we attend to Hobson et al. (2021) questioning of who undertakes consumption work, to what ends, and how its multiple forms are coordinated within the household. In contrast to the stark gender disparities observed in previous research on household sustainability practices (Lindsay et al., 2024; Organo et al., 2013; Waitt et al., 2012), our work points to a more nuanced gender division of labour with 'reuse work' being undertaken by both men and women. We acknowledge that activities of *decanting*, *stock management* and *recirculating* connect to

existing gendered divisions of labour within the home and are generally conducted and managed by a particular individual. Therefore, we suggest that future research should consider these labour dynamics further in order to understand how practices of reuse are negotiated within the household, particularly in relation to gendered dynamics of care (Lindsay et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2019). Our observations also suggest that people engage in consumption work, and more broadly domestic labour, for aesthetic reasons as well as for functional benefits, for example practising object stewardship to prolong the social life of things. These differing engagements warrant further attention.

Finally, conceptualizing these activities and tasks as 'consumption work' helps to understand the work that consumers are required to engage in as part of the transition to more circular forms of consumption. For example, the requirement on consumers to bring their own containers to reuse-refill stores results in several processual forms of labour, primarily that of *decanting* and *recirculating*. Whilst these activities may be interpreted as domestic labour due to them being household-based, we argue that they play a key role in the wider circuits of the reuse economy, extending well beyond the home. Allied to this, our sensitivity to how labour is distributed along the supply chain (Hobson et al., 2021) allows us to offer a rejoinder to the dominant framing of the role of 'consumers' in the circular economy. In contrast to the prevailing idea that the onus is on consumers to take up and 'accept' new business models and products, our work suggests that more emphasis should be placed on the retail sector to adapt to consumers' existing practices. Differentiating between reuse-refill and reuse-return methods of provisioning (EMF, 2019), raises questions about the nature and amount of consumption work and domestic labour involved in these different systems (Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015b). Future studies could usefully turn their attention to this complexity and nuance. Our approach also raises questions about who (state, market, or household) is required to do what work to ensure the success of reuse systems. As things stand, most of the work falls to individuals who are required to source, prepare, and maintain objects (*recirculate*) in refill systems, integrating these practices into their existing domestic routines. With a growing interest in transitioning towards a shared packaging economy (reuse-return), it is imperative to think about how best to recognize and formalize the work carried out by households whilst also questioning how responsibility and care should be reconfigured and formalized across the wider supply-chain.

## Notes

1. See https://www.polyflex.uk.com/news/what-is-the-uk-plastics-pact
2. See for example https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/unpacking-circular-economy-unlocking-reuse-scale
3. Use of the term 'performance' here reflects the conceptual distinction between practices as entities and practices as performances. Our focus here is on the latter; the former would require a different methodological approach.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our participants for their time and engaging in the research. The 'Many Happy Returns: enabling reusable packaging systems' project was supported by the UK's Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) under grant NE/V010638/1. Writing and analysis was also supported by a Leverhulme Trust project, under grant ECF-2022-022.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust [ECF-2022-022]; Natural Environment Research Council [NE/V010638/1].

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Rorie Beswick-Parsons**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **David M. Evans**: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Peter Jackson**: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

## Ethical statement

Ethical approval was received from the University of Sheffield (approval number: 039897).

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