

# “I’ve Stamped My Personality All Over It”: The Meaning of Objects in Teenage Bedroom Space

Space and Culture  
2014, Vol. 17(3) 266–279  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1206331212451677  
sac.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

“Private,” personal spaces such as the teenage bedroom are arguably one of the first spaces within which young people are able to articulate and represent their social and cultural lives, their transitions, experiences, aspirations, and identities. In this article, the author explores how bedrooms can be understood as constantly evolving and changing “material” spaces within which objects play an important role for young people in their articulations of youth culture in everyday life. Using Henri Lefebvre’s work on social space as a framework, the author argues that such spaces can be understood both as complex, rich “containers of meaning” within which teenagers articulate their current youth biographies as well as spaces within which “residual trails” can be found, thus a teenage bedroom takes on an important historical dimension, the space of which tells tales about its occupants, present and past.

## Keywords

teenagers, bedrooms, space, objects, Lefebvre

## Teenage Bedrooms and Materiality

The phrase *bedroom culture* was first coined by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1975) in their celebrated essay “Girls and Subcultures” written in response to the work of the CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham, UK) whose analyses of subcultures were predominantly based on depictions of the young working class boy hanging around the streets. McRobbie and Garber asked the question: “Where are the girls?”

In answering this question, they argued that teenage girls were living out their social and cultural lives in the private, domestic context of the home, and to this end, they suggested that bedrooms offered the ideal setting for the teenage girl to dip in and out of her domestic duties as well as in and out of home-based leisure pursuits. While this account essentially focuses on girls’ cultural practices in the home and the romantic ideals associated with them, some reference is made to the material items contained within it. However, as I argue elsewhere (Lincoln, 2012),

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although McRobbie and Garber were writing at a very different cultural time that is in many ways noncomparable to today's consumer-driven mediated youth cultures, within their work these objects are not discussed as meaningful possessions through which the girls' identities are worked on or which are part of their current cultural identities. Instead, the objects are seen as a "means to an end," that is, they facilitate and help conjure up the fantasy worlds of love and romance that McRobbie and Garber describe in their essay.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of work exploring the significance of bedrooms and "bedroom culture" in the lives of young people in late modern society (see, e.g., Abbott-Chapman & Robertson, 2009; Baker, 2004; James, 2000; Kearney, 2007; Larson, 1995; Lincoln, 2004, 2005; Livingstone, 2007; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Steele & Brown, 1995). Many of these studies, defined by theories such of "risk" and individualization (Beck, 1992; Roberts, 2009), explore teenage bedrooms in the context of leisure, youth culture, and the media and through concepts such as age, gender, and identity. Importantly, these studies illuminate the inherent interconnections between public and private spaces through which young people live their daily lives. James (2000), for example, explores the significance of bedrooms as gendered leisure sites regulated by "situational body image," that is, by the extent to which young women feel comfortable in situating themselves in different spaces and contexts, particularly in relation to public, male-dominated spaces (e.g., those related to sports). For James's participants bedrooms were described as spaces of safety, security, and control away from the public "gaze" of peers, spaces in which they could be themselves, not feel judged, for example, in terms of their skills in playing sports or their physique. The content of the teenage girl's bedroom is integral to the management of these feelings of safety and security and in this respect James explores the significance of "mess" and "memorabilia" (p. 80), describing how young girls surround themselves with their things as signifiers of ownership and control.

This theme is also captured in earlier "bedroom culture" scholarship, for example, in the work of Larson (1995), who argues that the space of the bedroom offers the ideal location in which young people are able to engage with their "newly discovered private self" (p. 535). Larson considers the role of the media as integral to this voyage of self-discovery and exploration, arguing that young people's solitary media practices are highly significant to their emerging youth identities and that these practices essentially function as a connection between the public and private worlds within which young people drift, and as a facilitator of young people's emotional and personal growing up experiences. More recently, Livingstone (2007) has argued that young people's bedrooms can be understood as "media-rich" spaces that signify a shift in the youth cultural activities of both teenage girls and boys from the streets (deemed dangerous and risky for young people, e.g., by parents and in the mass media, as well as lacking in leisure-related facilities such as youth clubs) back into the home as well as a fragmentation of family life (see also Lincoln, 2012). The capacity of new media technologies to entertain children and young people in multiple ways has resulted, Livingstone argues, in young people's private spaces being filled with those items once integral to family life, such as the television and more recently the Internet, games consoles, and so on. And while Livingstone's primary focus is on children who may not engage in a "bedroom culture" to the extent that teenagers do, she argues that the notion of the media-richness of space does not end with the technology. Indeed, many children's material possessions, defined, for example, by their love of a particular Disney film or franchise, are forms of "media-related merchandising" (Livingstone, 2007, p. 6) that become an integral part of their bedroom space. As Livingstone goes on to argue, and as I also explore below, the articulation of such possessions then shifts to be understood through discourses of escapism and identity exploration as these young people move toward their teenage years.

Much of this work touches on the meaning of the "things" that young people have in their bedrooms in relation to youth identities, transitions and cultures, although by and large this has

not been in any great depth, with emphasis being placed on youth cultural practices rather than spatiality and materiality. In addressing this theoretical gap, I wish to focus my discussions here on the proposition that such spaces can be understood as what Lefebvre (1991) describes as “containers” of meaning (p. 82), the space within which the dynamic “social relations between things” (p. 83) and the people who own them are captured. However, these containers, as well as the objects within them, are not restricted by the four concrete bedroom walls or the closing of bedroom door. Their porous edges enable a flow of the public and private realm of “larger functions and structures” (Lefebvre, 1987, p. 8), capturing the active engagement of young people in youth culture inside and outside of the home. Importantly, I argue that this is a space that is ever-changing and evolving and that as young people get older, their “things” can take on new meanings and associations as part of their emerging cultural identities. Furthermore, I draw on Lefebvre’s concept of “residual space” to argue that even when things are moved around (or out) of that space, an historical “trail” is inevitably left behind, “illuminating the past” and representing the present (p. 10). Additionally, I explore Moran’s (2004) argument that even objects from the past that remain in a particular space, and are not associated with the present occupant, still have meaning, even if that meaning is “unstable and elusive” (p. 51).

### Researching Private, “Personal” Space and Objects

In this article, I draw on ethnographic data collected for two research projects: my doctoral thesis, titled “Private Space and Teenage Culture: Age, ‘Zones’ and Identity” (2000-2003) and my monograph *Youth Culture and Private Space* (2012). All data was collected in Liverpool and Manchester in the North-West of England. The research process included a range of ethnographically informed methodologies, including visual and sensory ethnography (see Pink, 2009). For example, the data collected between 2000 and 2003 included in-depth interviews, photography (photos taken by the participants), and diaries with 40 young people, male and female, aged between the ages of 12 and 18 years. The more recent data collected between 2007 and 2009 involved in-depth interviews, observations, and photography with 10 participants, male and female between the ages of 16 and 22 years. Interviews took place in the participants’ bedrooms, either in the family home or in students’ halls of residence. The photographs used in this article were taken by the researcher during interviews and as the participants explained what objects in their bedrooms meant to them. In this article, I refer to a selection of my participants—namely, Sara, 13; Bethan, 13; Scarlett, 14; Millie, 15; Evie, 16; Nicola 16; James, 16; and Richard, 18—whose discussions about “things” illuminate some of the theoretical ideas explored in the following pages.

### Material Culture in Domestic Spaces

Although there is a fairly well-established body of work on teenage bedrooms, particularly in the sociology of youth, as noted above, still relatively little has been written about the role of private spaces in young people’s lives. This is not surprising given the ethical implications and practicalities of this type of research (see Baker, 2004; Dickinson, Murcott, Eldridge, & Leader, 2001; Lincoln, 2012). There is, however, a well-established body of literature in which the meaning of “things” are explored as anthropological and ethnographic intrigues (see, e.g., Digby, 2006; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007; Miller, 2008; Turkle, 2007) and more specifically literature in which homes as material spaces and spaces of identity have been explored in a variety of (historical) contexts (see, e.g., Hollows, 2008; Miller, 2001). Furthermore, a number of scholars have explored the complex dynamics of space, individualism, and ownership, for example, Ureta’s (2007) work on Chileans appropriating their new homes which highlights the tensions between

individualizing home space and the “dwelling” ideals of policy makers and property developers; Januarius’s (2009) work on the significance and appropriation of mass produced objects in homes of Belgian Limburg miners in the 1950s; and Búrikova’s (2006) ethnographic study of au pairs and their bedrooms. In this article, I draw on concepts such as age, youth culture and transitions as well as aspects of material culture as a way to explore further the complex dynamics of the domestic sphere, in this instance in teenage bedrooms. In doing this, I hope to illustrate how one might understand such complexities through young people’s material possessions by using a theoretical framework that captures the continual changes in teenage life, and one that sees young people constantly interacting and flowing between the public and the private realm.

### **Contemporary Teenager Bedroom Culture: A Lefebvrian Interpretation**

Specifically, in this article I wish to explore teenagers’ everyday, often mundane uses of bedroom space as “containers” of meaning and in accordance with what Lefebvre (1991) refers to as “residual space.” Such concepts enable an understanding of how everyday spaces such as teenage bedrooms are historically “connected” and how in the very fabric of that space there is both a present, current story to tell as well as a meaningful past history. In this sense, private spaces such as the teenage bedroom can be understood as material spaces in which historical trails are left all over the place, with varying degrees of permanency and significance. Such trails may be unwitting but, nevertheless, are tell-tale signs of occupants both past and present, or as Moran (2004) argues, are evidence of a “collective experience” (even if not experienced together) of dwelling in that space (p. 60). The trails tell of the tensions and struggles as well as developments and discoveries within teenage bedrooms, or what Clarke (2001) refers to as social relations in action. By exploring the teenage bedroom as a container of meaning and residual space, I put forward an argument that sees the bedroom as a site of material culture that is made up of complex “layers,” which are often articulated by individuals but also undeniably influenced by household hierarchies and past bedroom inhabitants.

The work of Henri Lefebvre (1971, 1987, 1991) on space and the everyday has proved particularly useful in theorizing how contemporary bedroom space might be understood, especially when teenagers in this context can be described as individual, active users of material objects (Lincoln, 2012). Importantly, Lefebvre’s work makes reference to the inevitable links between public and private space and the meaningfulness of one space in relation to another. Furthermore, Lefebvre highlights the complexities in the routines of using everyday spaces, as people move in and out of them, constantly historicizing and altering the meaning of that space. Even if these trails are subtle and vague, they nonetheless manage to find their way into the current context of the present occupier. For instance, in a teenage bedroom this might come in the form of old posters; stickers on wardrobe, doors, or mirrors; paint (perhaps layers of it revealed by a piece that has chipped away); layers of wallpaper; or pieces of furniture. When “renaturalized” into a contemporary context these “things” take on new, alternative meanings, referencing the new “things” brought into those spaces and the new experiences that take place within them. Sometimes remnants of past occupants are moved, sometimes not.

Richard, aged 18, had his own room in halls of residence in Liverpool. On his bedroom wall there was a poster of the band Kings of Leon. Of this poster Richard said:

Someone moved out and left it behind, so I just had it. . . . I mean I do like the Kings of Leon so I thought I might as well keep it. And then my friends graffitit’d it!

Richard was “keen” to have posters up in his bedroom because the room was quite bare when he moved in and his new friends had “lined [the] walls” with posters. Aside from discussions about what these posters represented to a new set of friends, Richard’s use of materials preexisting his occupancy was interesting. Richard was a fan of the band already and was therefore happy to keep the poster up, integrating it into the things he has brought with him from home (e.g., guitars, stereo, CD collection). The poster, although a leftover part of his new surroundings, nestled unobtrusively among familiar objects from home. The poster was then graffiti’d by his friends (e.g., by each of the band members being given “speech bubbles” with comments in) and thus the poster was given a new “layer” of meaning through its defacement, not only as part of Richard’s room but as part of his wider, new found independence, experiences, and friends. No longer is the poster just a remnant, a “hang over” from the previous occupant, but it is given new life and significance. Furthermore, Richard commented that since the addition of the graffiti, on seeing the poster, other friends would comment on the graffiti first, and the band second, on its newly articulated meaning rather than its original, more “elusive” meaning (Moran, 2004, p. 51). But despite knowing little, if anything, about the past occupant other than a part of their music tastes, this is, nonetheless, a sign of a life before (differentiated from the generic set up of halls of residence rooms that are by their very nature cold and lifeless when unoccupied), an historical trail that has been left in what is now Richard’s room. The object leaving this trail has, in turn, been obscured and personalized. Perhaps Richard will leave it in his room when he moves out for the next occupant, or perhaps he will take it with him, and the poster will continue to be significant to him beyond those four walls and as part of his future experiences.

### **The Meaning of Objects I: Investing in the Private**

Teenage bedrooms can be complex sites of identity construction and management, the symbolic value of which are unique to each young person. This construction and management, though, cannot be understood without some reference to power relations in the home. Typically, bedrooms are not under the absolute control of the teenager but are often influenced by siblings and parents who exhort their own levels of power and ownership over the space. Teenage bedrooms spaces do not exist in isolation from other rooms in the household. As social spaces they “interpenetrate” other rooms in the house (e.g., through playing loud music, the noise of which can be heard beyond the bedroom walls) and are “superimposed” by other rooms (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86). For example, bedrooms are not only filled with the objects that are considered a “usual” part of that space (e.g., furniture or items such as CDs, DVDs, magazines, clothes) but also with objects such as plates, glasses, cutlery, and cups that have found their way into bedroom from other rooms in the house such as the kitchen and have become semipermanent fixtures in the bedroom. Parents enter the treacherous grounds of their teenagers’ bedrooms to retrieve these things, as well as to pick up laundry or tidy up, crossing the “boundaries” of their children’s personal space (Lincoln, 2004), penetrating it further with their physical presence—a presence that ordinarily might not be welcomed by the young occupant. The influence of parents (who more often than not pay for the things young people have in their rooms) on this space invariably plays out further. Decisions about decoration, for example, are often made after discussion and debate between teenagers and their parents who have to work through the tensions of the teenager in a cool, fashionable space emulating the latest tastes in decoration versus a parent thinking more pragmatically perhaps about the use of the space beyond their children’s dwelling. For example, Sara, aged 13, talks about how she, her sister, and her mother came to an agreement about their newly decorated room:



**Figure 1.** The bookshelf in Nicola’s bedroom. Image courtesy of Siân Lincoln.

My Mum chose the wallpaper but we said “right, we’ll get silver beds and we’ll get green sheets and blue things.”

The four walls of a bedroom make it a rather generic site, just another room in a house. However, according to Lefebvre, it is what is contained within a space and the occupant’s relationship to those things that creates meaning and significance. This act of “making the room one’s own” is crucial for any young person in the unfolding of their biographies, albeit a making that is achieved via a series of negotiations as the example of Sara above demonstrates. A young person having his or her own space and enjoying a sense of ownership and control (e.g., regulating who is allowed in and who is not) is a rite that resembles a move toward independence. As James, aged 16, put it,

If I didn’t want something in my room then I won’t have it, unless it’s storing something for my mum. I still have the choice even if I’m asked to take something down. I let mum come in to drop of the laundry but I don’t like it if she just comes in, when I’m angry people know not to come in. I don’t need signs on the door, people knock before coming in, they don’t just barge in . . . they come in when asked.

Once the bedroom door is open a “container” of meaning is revealed whereby perhaps initial judgments are made about the interests and identity of its occupant. On closer inspection, objects and items appear layered and thus working to “historicize” the space. The display of items from childhood to the present day provides visual indications of growing up and new experiences.

Nicola’s bedroom (Figure 1) is an example of “historical residue.” Figure 1 shows a photograph of a young Nicola with her brother, alongside a Beatrix Potter print, a childhood gift. Propping up the photograph and print are a number of books that represent Nicola’s current interests in music and politics. Interestingly, the objects from childhood are prominent and have not been moved to a more discreet place or hidden away. For Nicola, their placing is not necessarily deliberate; rather, it is functional but they still remain a meaningful part of the “content” of Nicola’s bedroom.

James, on the other hand, removed “stuff from his childhood” when he decided to redecorate his bedroom. In describing his bedroom, he explained how his new room represented his current life, aged 16, and was not one that contained remnants of his childhood past. These things had been actively removed. Furthermore, while James was also becoming more active in the public realm, as I discuss below, his bedroom was by no means just a functional space but one deliberately arranged to represent him. As he says,

I’ve stamped my personality all over it, if you’d have come 6 months earlier you would have seen stuff from my childhood. If you’re going to live in your room you have to make it everything you like.

Scarlett, aged 14, did something similar when she moved into her older brother’s bedroom after he had left for university.

I don’t know what colour [it will be] yet, but it’s not going to be girly at all. . . . It’s just gonna be. . . . I don’t want any teddies in my room when I move. I just don’t want it to be girly.

For Scarlett, demonstrating that she is grown up is inextricably linked to what she described as “girly” (i.e., “childish”), a term she articulated through the materiality of her bedroom. Her current bedroom was peach in color and had teddies on display. But by removing these remnants of her childhood, Scarlett felt able to represent her emerging adult life.

Youth lifestyles are not static but are indeed constantly shifting and changing as part of a young person’s emerging identity. In this respect, reorganizing the teenage bedroom was a popular activity, one that involved moving around and reordering space and possessions.

Millie’s bed ran alongside her wardrobe, so she was able to watch television and DVDs while lying on her bed. Watching television, especially the “soaps,” was one of her favorite pastimes when not doing school work or preparing for exams. Millie, aged 15, was a collector of Disney memorabilia, especially soft toys, and she had been collecting them for a number of years. Millie’s practices with such possessions reflect Dittmar’s (1992) argument that:

If people are asked *themselves* which possessions are important to them, they typically refer to a range of personally owned objects that are relatively durable, i.e., possessions which surround them for some time after they are first acquired. (pp.14-15)

Indeed, despite having these items for a number of years, her Disney memorabilia still had much significance in her bedroom and still played a part in her individual biography. The soft toys seen in both photographs (Figures 2 and 3) once sat on Millie’s bed but had more recently been moved to a new place on top of the wardrobe. There were practical reasons for this move given that Millie’s room was small with limited space. To this end, while some of the toys remained on her bed, the majority were placed on top of the wardrobe. Second, Millie was also an avid Liverpool Football Club (LFC) supporter, the memorabilia of which was increasingly taking up a large part of her space. Other objects had to be “pushed out” and moved elsewhere to account for this influx. In contrast to Scarlett above, Millie embraced the things that represented her childhood and interestingly, despite her love of LFC, her “girliness” was not suppressed or rejected but neither did it dominate the room. Rather, her femininity was intermeshed with her hobbies and interests as a football fan. This was visually represented in her bedroom through trails of clashing colors (pink fairy lights draping over a red LFC clock) and teddy bears nestling on her bed among LFC cushions.



**Figure 2.** On top of Millie’s wardrobe 1. Image courtesy of Siân Lincoln.

The photographs in Figures 2 and 3 are also interesting when reflecting on the symbolic nature of teenage bedrooms. For example, beyond the issues of using limited space, the “ordering” of the toys above the wardrobe is highly significant. In the first photograph (Figure 2), to the fore is the TV, DVD player, VCR, and FreeView box, while clustered behind are the Disney toys. However, as the second photograph (Figure 3) shows, the toys are not simply “thrown” up there, but are well ordered and positioned, and as objects of nostalgia are treated with respect—put out of harm’s way. Here is a mini-display, “showcasing” a sample of the toys collected. The fact that this display has been “worked on” by Millie demonstrated that it is still to be seen, is a layer of personal history in her space, though it’s positioning makes it inconspicuous and subtle. One would probably only notice it if they were to spend time in the room or if Millie were to show them the collection. In a rather more abstract way, the collection, which started out being on Millie’s bed, has been moved away from the center of the room toward the door, next to which the wardrobe is placed. This brings us back to Lefebvre (1991), who suggests,

Alternatively [space] may be marked abstractly, by means of discourse, by means of signs. Space thus requires symbolic value. Symbols, on this view, always imply an emotional investment, an affective charge (fear, attraction, etc.), which is so to speak deposited at a particular place and thereafter “represented” for the benefit of everyone else. (p. 141)

Following Lefebvre one could argue that Millie’s practices represent an emerging from childhood into adulthood, a transition captured in her bedroom. In this way, bedrooms are made more or less meaningful in line with the “current” identity of its occupant. At the same time items may retain some significance, even if they end up occupying a different space after some reordering. In this sense, they become virtually inconspicuous but still part of the fabric, flow and meaning of that space, contributing to the ever-growing “layers” of history within it.

## **The Meaning of Objects 2: Investing in the Public**

As outlined above, bedroom culture has been conceptualized as isolated from the public sphere (see McRobbie & Garber, 1975). However, more contemporary accounts of teenage bedroom





**Figure 3.** On top of Millie's wardrobe 2. Image courtesy of Siân Lincoln.

culture acknowledge that the two spheres are inextricably linked. Below, using examples of teenage life in bedrooms explored through a Lefebvrian framework, it is clear that in understanding the materiality of teenage bedrooms, one sphere cannot be detached from the other. Young people's uses of these two spheres, though, differ greatly, and this differentiation is often made through age and being "old enough" to engage in public life, for example, going to the cinema, bars, or clubs, which I examine below.

Furthermore, in his discussion of social space, Lefebvre (1991) suggests that the uses of space are also restricted by the space itself. He claims "space lays down the law because it implies a certain order—and hence a certain disorder" (p. 103). A fitting example comes from one of my participants, Bethan, who was 13 years old and shared a bedroom with her 7-year-old sister.

One day I was sat on my bed and it collapsed, so I had to move it all and then I had to use my mattress on the floor . . . and it's dead bouncy so she's [her sister] always jumping on my bed. And it bugs me because I'm stood there like putting on a CD and all I can see in the mirror is her jumping up and down.

The mirror was particularly significant here as it enabled Bethan to see (and for the reader to visualize) both the spaces of her and her sister's (inter)actions as well as the attempt at order among the inevitable disorder. In accordance with Scarlett's comments above, the differentiations that Bethan drew between her and her sister's space were made with reference to the material objects associated with her sister's "childish" behavior (jumping on the bed) versus what she classes as her more "grown up" behavior (putting on a CD).

According to my research, young people in this sample started to be curious about "life in public space" around the age of 14. "Looking older" and gaining access to bars, pubs, clubs, and so on, becomes an attractive and necessary challenge. It is a "rite of passage" and one that is discussed, particularly among teenage girls, with much excitement and vigor. The "materiality" of being or looking older in public leisure spaces is mostly done through clothing and style and much discussion takes place before nights out or parties as to what to wear. For example, Sara, 13 years old, explained,

This is what you wear, stuff like this [Sara shows me the clothes]. The last time I wore this with my knee-high boots. What did I wear the first time? The purple top I think . . . no, a purple skirt and knee-high boots. Everyone gets dressed up . . . you can't wear the same thing twice, d'you know what I mean?

Evidence of "going out rituals" (Hollands, 1995) begins to emerge. Around this age young people might be allowed by parents or adults to go to the cinema, to gigs, to football games, or cafes, bars, and clubs with friends or siblings. Some may consider a part-time job. Being allowed access to public spaces is in itself a defining rite, standing for responsibility and increasing independence, granted by an adult. It is here too that we start to see shifting patterns and new signification of private, personal bedroom spaces. What we also start to see is an "overlapping" of the uses of public and private space. Of course, the influence of public life is by no means detached from bedroom space before this point, as the content of the average teenager's space is influenced by the media (e.g., through references to particular bands or musicians, TV shows, films, etc.) and the technology within it (TV, DVD player, PC or laptop, the Internet, iPods, playstations, and mobile phones). But the key difference here is that there is a transition from the *influence* of public spaces on a young person's cultural life to the actual *use* of them. Dittmar (1992) argues that the construction of identity is achieved through "possessions" (p. 14) and that our relationship with the possessions that surround us is influenced by the culture of which a person is part. Teenagers often adorn their bedroom walls, for example, with club flyers, but until they reach an age when they are "allowed" access to public spaces, they can only really imagine what that actual clubbing experience would be like (supplemented with compilation CDs often produced by "commercial" clubs such as Ministry of Sound). In effect, this "projection" helps shape the biography of that particular teenager's bedroom and the teenager's self-created identity in that space. It is at this point that we see an overlapping of the public and the private through the space of the bedroom. No longer is the bedroom a space of wonderment and fantasy but one in which engagement in public life becomes a reality—going to the clubs on the flyers on the bedroom wall.

As a young person moves through their teens toward their 20s the negotiation of both public and private space becomes more and more significant. In many ways it shifts from being an evolving, integral, private, personal identity space, to one that becomes more of an "oscillating" space between public and private. This is when it becomes more static and stabilized. The visual arrangement of private space can also become more significant in terms of transitions, particularly in relation to young people who are working toward important exams. Taking exams is an important "link" in the transition from school to college, university, or work, and ultimately to public life. To this end, preparing for exams can lead to a young person reconsidering the role, purpose, and use of private space as these are often turbulent and anxious times. Evie, for example, who at the time of her interview was preparing for her mock "A" level exams, talked in depth about the use of the desk in her bedroom (Figure 4).

For Evie, while her desk was a place to store her school work and books, it was not the desk at which she actually did school work; this she did on the dining room table downstairs that had been set up for her studies. It was crucial during Evie's exams that her bedroom remained a space largely dissociated with doing work for school. She spoke in detail about the "height" of the things on her desk and was adamant that her piles of book and other objects on the desk did not go above eye level:

I started getting a lot more work and a lot more text books and things to bring home and I had no room to put them and put them all on top of the desk. . . . I couldn't deal with it and I like, and when I say I like revising with my piles of subject and things, I couldn't do



**Figure 4.** Evie's desk. Image courtesy of Siân Lincoln.

it and you know, it's just so much better having the bigger space and you have less on your desk. And having everything quite low as well, I think that's a big thing because it's below your eye line isn't it so when you walk in and you just want to relax, it's not kind of in your eye level is it, it's all kind of down there isn't it.

This was part of her endeavor to maintain her bedroom as a space of escapism, chilling out, a space in which to read for pleasure, listen to music, or to play her keyboard or guitar, a space to relax with friends or her boyfriend. She made the conscious decision that her bedroom was to be a haven in which she could get away from her studies. This sense of creating a bedroom as a space of escapism was further enhanced through other objects in Evie's bedroom such as numerous books, CDs, photographs, postcards, lava lamps, posters, and musical instruments.

Millie did the exact opposite. For her, her bedroom was one of the quietest spaces in the house, a house also occupied by her mum and dad and three siblings. Being able to escape to her bedroom was as important as it was for Evie, yet Millie considered her bedroom to be the place in which to get on with her school work and to prepare for her exams. It was clear to see from her bedroom that this space was also a leisure space and that the size of the room meant that because there was limited room space for a desk, her bed became the place where she would do work. As I discuss above, Millie liked to watch DVDs in her bedroom and, again in opposition to Evie, because her room was often a work space, she had her TV and DVD player on top of her wardrobe, above eye level. So as Evie tried to avoid unnecessary infiltration of school work time into the leisure zone of her bedroom, Millie minimized the distraction of leisure time in her work zone. There is a careful and deliberate working of personal and private space here in accordance with the main activities that take place within the bedroom and in accordance with whomever occupies the house and other activities going on. The placing of objects in bedroom space is vital in this as demonstrated by Millie.

There is then, as seen in the examples above, a constant interplay of public life in private space and there are multiple scenarios within which private space and its content are negotiated. These negotiations are often unique to the young person themselves and dependent on multiple contextual influences, both inside and outside of the home. The examples above clearly demonstrate

the active way in which young people themselves give objects meaning and how these meanings are contextualized within the spaces that they are found. Objects become part of the “tapestry” of a young person’s emerging and constantly evolving cultural history; they are intertwined. As Lefebvre (1991) eloquently put it, “Space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning” (p. 154).

## Conclusion

Studies of teenage bedroom culture have existed since the 1970s; for example, scholars such as McRobbie and Garber (1975) explored domestic space as a site of teenage culture for young women. However, very little has been written about such spaces until more recently when, for example, discourses around the “risky” dangerous streets have marked a “shift” of youth cultural activities from the streets into the home (Livingstone, 2007). Larson (1995), Steele and Brown (1995), James (2000), and others explore the significance of bedrooms in the lives of young people, emphasizing the dynamic and active uses of such spaces within contexts such as gender, identity, and the media. While these accounts do make some allusions to the materiality of bedrooms and the importance of objects to young people, their emphasis is more readily on the cultural practices that take place in that space.

In this article then I have explored the meaning of objects to young people in their bedrooms and how their possessions are articulated into existing, past, and emerging histories and biographies. Using a Lefebvrian framework, I have explored how teenage bedrooms can be understood as “containers of meaning” and as spaces of “residual trails” within which a history of the occupant, both present and past, is “left over” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 97). Bedrooms are spaces within which there is a constant movement of things. As I have argued, sometimes this movement is deliberate, with young occupants making conscious decisions about which objects represent them at that current moment. At other times, objects left over from childhood simply remain, but are still an important part of the fabric of that space. As I have suggested, such decisions are often made in accordance with age and getting older when a reorganization of bedroom spaces coincides with important transitions such as taking exams or moving rooms. Furthermore, as young people become more accustomed to a social and cultural life in the public sphere, their bedrooms take on new significances, with their public lives being represented through their material possessions.

In this way, objects can have multiple meanings that change over time and their placing in bedrooms changes accordingly. In this sense “residual trails,” the “left overs” from childhood or from previous occupants, can be found. Sometimes these objects are rearticulated into a new context and sometimes they are removed altogether. Either way, these objects have meaning. Teenage bedrooms are fluid, evolving spaces, the meaning of which is essentially made through the things contained in it. Through their possessions and housed in their bedrooms, young people able to articulate their place in culture as well as their emerging and evolving identities.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Sections of this article have been published in my monograph ‘Youth Culture and Private Space’. Palgrave Macmillan has given permission for those sections to be used.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research conducted between 2000 and 2003 was supported by a PhD studentship from the Department of Sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

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