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Scarred objects and time marks as memory anchors: the significance of scuffs and stains in organisational life

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Abstract

This article lays the workplace under the microscope to examine how scuffs on floors and battered corners on desks – things we define as 'scarred objects' – become material autobiographical archives and are made into memory anchors by workers. We explore how these scarred objects, construed as insignificant by some, become integral to workers' sense of memory and continuity. These scarred objects become time marks (Walsh, 1992) which provide a sense of embeddedness in an otherwise flexible, transient working world. We draw on material culture and sociological literatures, and the work of Burnett and Holmes (2001), to make sense of scarred objects in terms of their significance to workers as well as their construal of work and relationship to organisation mediated through memory. This article is based on empirical, visual data gathered from a nine-month study involving 43 hairdressers working in hair salons. We offer three contributions: first, we develop a new area of material studies – at a micro-level – that extends our understanding of objects in the workplace; second, we demonstrate how scarred objects anchor workers' sense of memory; third, we show the importance of scarred objects in the context of greater flexibility and liquidity in contemporary work.

Keywords: archives, hairdressers, hair salons, liquidity, memory, objects, scars, space, visual research

Introduction: Blemished things

'The little Rabbit was…so happy that he never noticed how his beautiful velveteen fur was getting shabbier and shabbier…and all the pink rubbed off his nose where the boy

had kissed him…Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand' The Velveteen Rabbit, Margery Williams, 1922: 11-17.

Imperfections and seemingly mundane marks make frequent appearances in our everyday lives. In the classic children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit,* we read how toys in a nursery become real and loved when they are shabby and worn. Similarly, we hear about the mundanity of '*a cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces*' in the first line of Nat King Cole's song, '*These Foolish Things (remind me of you)*' (Strachey and Maschwitz, 1935). And, we are told a cigar burn (made by Jerry Lee Lewis) on the keys of a piano is one of the most photographed things by visitors to the famous Sun Studios, Memphis, Tennessee (Rock n Roll America, 2015).

In organisational life, these imperfections may be considered crucial individualising features, enabling us to differentiate between allegedly identical objects, standardised workspaces or uniform activities. They have the potential to help employees navigate their way through modernised, sanitised workplaces where clear desks, paperless offices and lean spaces are now considered the norm (Bean and Hamilton, 2006; Fabrizio and Tapping, 2006; Locher, 2016), and where flexibility and transience are key characteristics for so many contemporary organisations (Bauman, 2000). Yet, even though marks, scuffs and stains are prevalent in most organisational spaces and these unassuming, shabby and at times intentionally hidden aspects of organisational life are experienced by most employees, they have rarely drawn the attention of organisational scholars.

To begin to address this lack of attention, this article explores our concept of 'scarred objects' – scuff marks on floors, stains on clothes, and battered corners on desks. The articles explores how scarred objects are made into meaningful memory anchors by workers – thus facilitating employee's sense of belonging and connection in response to wider organisational narratives around flexibility, which characteristically depersonalises workplaces and leads to sterility and blandness (see Riach and Warren, 2015). To focus on this micro level of detail, we discuss these scars on the surface of objects and spaces as 'time marks' (Walsh, 1992). Time marks are defined as marks (either naturally or humanly made) in the material world that make time visible. Walsh (1992: 152) describes how 'people gain a sense of place through…a subjective engagement with these time marks'. We are interested in how time marks are used by workers to anchor themselves in the workplace, provide a sense of history and heritage, and as such become material autobiographical archives. In the relative absence of organisation literature pertinent to this area of inquiry, we draw on material culture, museology and sociology. In particular, we draw on the work of Burnett and Holmes (2001), to make sense of these scars on objects and spaces and the significance of their subjective histories. This literature is particularly useful because it draws attention to the ways in which we make sense of our past in relation to the minutiae of the material world. And, in order to demonstrate the significance of scarred objects as autobiographical archives and show how people regain subjective material histories in the contemporary workplace, we draw on Bauman's (2000) work on liquid modernity. Liquid modernity describes the condition of social life as one that is constantly changing and where identities are unstable or in a state of flux (Bauman, 2000). We argue that as workplaces become more fluid and depersonalised, a sense of history and memory is wiped away, to the point that we are left history-less. Therefore, we offer three main contributions in our paper: first, we develop a new area of material studies – at a micro-level – that extends our understanding of scarred objects (their mundanity made significant in the workplace context

through the imperfections by which they are marked). Second, we demonstrate how scarred objects anchor workers' sense of memory and history. Third, we show the importance of scarred objects in the context of liquid modernity and the inexorable move towards greater flexibility in contemporary work.

This article begins with a theoretical framing of objects in the context of memory and history, with reference to material culture studies (Miller, 1998, 2008) and consumer studies (Belk, 1988; Tian and Belk, 2005). We examine the scuffs and stains of broken and imperfect objects and their associations with identity, memory and attachment (e.g. Turkle, 2011) and we begin to develop the concept of 'scarred objects' in the material lives of workers**.** We use the work of Burnett and Holmes (2001) to set the scene for the examination of our data. Their framework, which is based on the exploration of scars on the body, broadly suggests that since scars have symbolic significance to the person who owns them, bodily scars are therefore sites of personal heritage and memory. We transpose their corporeal-oriented framework into a material plane, thus likening the surface of an object to the surface of the body – experiencing the object in a manner rendered meaningful by its owner or user and the marks on it as comparable to meaningful scars on the skin. We propose considering these attachment-inducing scarred objects in a theoretical context that addresses temporariness and a lack of belonging – characterising these times of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Following this, the visual field study methods and data made by the hairdressers working in hair salons are presented. These data show how scarred objects are made meaningful by workers and how these blemishes all tell stories about: *Years of hard graft*; *Memories of social relationships*; and *Overcoming painful pasts*. Our data reveal how, for these workers, blemished objects become time marks (Walsh, 1992) and are vital in anchoring their sense of memory, belonging, and continuity in the workplace. Against this bedrock, and fertilised by individual accounts making blemishes

significant, scarred objects are formed. We conclude that scarred objects act as anchors in the context of liquid modernity, and it is at our peril we continue to depersonalise and sanitise our workplaces.

Literature review

Objects and memories

Artefactual objects connect us to a sense of who we are – through memories, the past, and connections to others (Macdonald and Fyfe, 1996) and, through heritage (Dawdy, 2016). Literatures in material culture, sociology and anthropology develop the mnemonic dimension of marking space, and a body of work on 'artefactual *memory*' highlights the 'complex significance of objects and buildings for our memories' (Urry, 1996: 50). The arena of material (and consumer) culture has helped develop this conceptual understanding, by considering the ways objects and possessions are contributors to and reflections of a person's life histories (Appadurai, 1988; Belk, 1988; Belk and Mehta, 1991; Miller, 1998, 2008; Schultz Kleine et al., 1995; Tian and Belk, 2005). Indeed, Schultz Kleine et al. (1995) argue that one's attachment to possessions describes 'me-ness' and that photographs, objects and things reflect, for example, one's family heritage. Attachments to objects also portray a person's individuality, for example 'a ring that signifies my first real job' (Schultz Kleine et al., 1995: 327) and reveals how we see past selves as embedded within these material memories (Kwint et al., 1999). Furthermore, material culture literature not only highlights the connections between objects and individual memory and history, but also the notion that objects can be considered extensions of our bodies. It is argued that objects can be understood as 'prosthetic extensions' of our physical selves (Belk, 1988; Tian and Belk, 2005; Turkle, 2011) such as additional hands, limbs, or brains (Tian and Belk, 2005: 300).

Other object-histories, particularly in the domestic setting are examined in a similar vein in anthropology and sociology literatures (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Hoskins, 1998). Hoskins (1998: 7), for example, adopts a biographical perspective on objects and explores how 'cloth, jewellery…porcelain dishes' are imbued with the 'qualities' of that person – such that, at a temporal level, their historical narratives can be 'physically' observed in the objects. Broadly, these studies highlight how the meanings we associate with objects are often not in direct relation to their functional use, but instead to their historical ties with people, such as family members or friends, and are cherished in some way (like heirlooms) because of the memories they evoke. What matters is what they become, rather than what they were designed to be (Thomas, 1991: 125). These histories position us in another time-place (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981) and provide us with a sense of who we are and as such, a sense of security and identity (Jacobs and Malpass, 2013).

These broad conceptualisations of objects and memory usefully shed light on two key things. Firstly, the objects examined are predominantly possessions or valuables – they are often owned, inherited or something that we can already call 'ours'. Secondly, the (auto)biographical meanings of objects or artefacts explored (certainly in consumer culture) principally focus on those things that are special or somehow exclusive, like a ring or a piece of embroidery or other luxury item (Mehta and Belk, 1991; Miller, 2008; Schiffer and Miller, 1999). Such theoretical ideas help us to consider how we might extend this existing body of literature by examining those objects that are not always owned, nor necessarily special.

As such, and importantly for this paper, it is useful to turn to the small number of material studies scholars who discuss the imperfect parts of everyday objects and who are sensitive to the rather peculiar qualities of ordinary, everyday stuff (see DeSilvey, 2007; Miller, 2009; Turkle, 2011; Zuccotti, 2015). For example, in Turkle's work (2011: 227) we see the micro-

examination of inherited rolling pins by Susan Pollak with particular reference to chipped paint on the handles reminding her of her Grandmother. In addition, we see the significance of the contents of a kitchen junk drawer filled with half broken objects explored in 'memory-work on a Montana homestead' (DeSilvey, 2007). And in Miller's 'comfort of things' we hear how objects considered 'junk' create a sense of cosiness for those who own them (2008: 112). Common to all these studies from across a wide range of literatures are the broken, scratched and scuffed surfaces of objects – not necessarily just the objects themselves – that hold meaning and a sense of archive and memory. Such studies prompt us to consider not just the ordinary object itself, but the characteristics of its imperfect surface and what meanings those imperfections hold.

More specifically related to organisational life, these imperfections of and about objects in the context of memory are hardly researched. In fact, the broad relationship between organisational materiality – including buildings and objects – and memory, has been explored by only a limited number of scholars (see Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Dittmar, 1992; Elsbach, 2004; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007; Gagliardi, 1990; Strati, 1992). For example, Gagliardi's view of the corporate landscape takes account of buildings that are representative and symbolic of organisational culture and are often discussed as markers of time and organisational history. And, in Brown and Humphrey's (2006) paper, we see just how significant buildings are for people and their ability to nostalgically reminisce about the past. Much of the existing research on memory in organisations focuses on the role of near-permanent elements, such as architectural designs of buildings (Giovannoni and Napier, 2016) and commemorative settings (Cutcher et al., 2016).

Other contributions to organisation studies explore the individual's relationship with workplace objects and memory and often emphasise the distinctiveness of the object itself. For example,

the importance of the display of special personal objects in the workplace and how deeply connected they are to identity and a sense of belonging (Elsbach, 2004). Tian and Belk (2005: 300) draw attention to another distinctive category of objects in the workplace – possessions, such as laptops and books – and discuss the ways in which they are used to 'literally extend the self'. Since research specific to organisation studies that examines memory suggests it is the subjective experience of the person who does the remembering that really matters (Ciuk and Kostera, 2010: 93), it stands to reason that individual memory prompts – like special objects on desks – in the context of work, should be seen as pivotal sensemaking triggers (Brown et al., 2008) relevant to an individual's self-perception, emotional attachment and belonging.

It is pertinent at this juncture that we define how objects, and specifically organisational objects, are understood in this paper. Organisational objects are all things, matter, stuff that are non-permanent/ changeable features of/ within a building/ place of work. These things can range from staplers and scissors, to carpets, flooring and furniture. And it is this connection between organisational objects and individual memory that we wish to extend. First, even though the role of material objects in the context of organisational remembering has been noticed (Blagoev et al., 2018), scant attention has been given to the relatively more mundane yet immediately palpable material components: objects, things and stuff, accompanying subjective, individual workplace histories or memories. It is to this understanding we intend to contribute in our paper. We are exploring the everyday items of work that, objectively speaking, are rather ordinary, and which in the era of workplace flexibility and clear desk policies, are normally not owned.

Second, to complement and further extend these organisationally specific examples, we wish to address the individually significant elements of objects and memory on a micro-scale. As discussed above, contributions in material culture studies have begun to examine not just the

object itself and how it connects to memory, but the scuffs and marks on them too and how such imperfections on objects are deemed important by the individual. Few scholars have explored this link between worker memory, organisational objects and the various marks which feature on them. In this paper, we conceptualise these marked objects as 'scarred objects'. Whilst retaining a focus on the object itself, we are simultaneously emphasising the meaning that people place on the objects' scarred nature/ surface. Thus, we suggest that scarred objects are an important feature of the material world of work which have, thus far, been overlooked. At the heart of this article we question how and why scarred objects are associated with memory and are thus made meaningful by workers? And what do scarred objects mean in the context of work?

Scarred objects

We conceptualise 'scarred objects' as encompassing all tarnished, scuffed and marked objects that are accompanied by an account about the scar on them, thus rendering them significant. So, the scars on objects – the battered corner of a desk, the scratches on the floor – are all non-perfect elements of their respective host objects yet become part of their inherent nature, particularly over time (like the worn fur of the Velveteen Rabbit described in the opening of this paper). We make sense of such scars in terms of them occupying a protracted territory in which, despite being outside the scope of original design – or rather *because* of being outside – scars can define an object in the eyes of an individual. We approach scars as neither purely physical, nor entirely experiential – they emerge from the relationship between a person and the object or space one is interacting with (Debord, 1967/1995). Therefore, in this sense, not every imperfection is a scar – only the ones considered to be meaningful for those who interact with them.

Here, scars can be perceived as heritage-like objects (like those discussed above), enabling a re-telling of their history. Usefully, Burnett and Holmes – whose framework is based on the

exploration of scars on the body – argue that scars can be considered prompts. Scars enable a representation of ones' past – as aide memoires triggering recollections, which locate us within certain environments (Burnett and Holmes, 2001). The authors suggest scars are not extraordinary in themselves, they are easily missed or ignored, and they can be considered mundane signs of wear and tear when spotted (like Turkle's chipped rolling pin (2011), discussed above). So, scarred objects start as mundane objects. In the context of our paper, they are practical in a work-context (e.g. a desk) or inscribed in the normal work process (equipment, like a drinking glass or stationery). And, in many workplaces, like the one discussed in this paper, their ownership depersonalises them further – they belong to a workplace, rather than an employee. What makes them special, is not the historical accuracy of the events they remind us of, but rather their symbolic significance based on their selective interpretation accompanied by the account – a curation telling their story, transforming them into 'things worth knowing' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 23). Scarred objects therefore undergo two transitions – from unremarkable to special, and from work-related to person-related. These transitions are interlinked and mediated by their scarring through which the owner or user creates meaning.

As such, in the context of our paper, scars can therefore be understood as those elements in the environment which enable us to locate past events in time, develop an individual construal of them, and provide us with the subjective notion of the past. They are akin to 'time marks': scratches or stains (either naturally or humanly made) in the material world that make time visible (Walsh, 1992: 152), enabling us to develop a 'sense of place' (Walsh, 1992: 12). Hence, scarred objects mark external organisational spaces, simultaneously transforming our inner territories via memories which prompt and situate us in time and place (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 30).

Whilst Burnett and Holmes' (2001) concepts specifically focus on bodily scars – recollecting past physical traumas and social relationships – we suggest an ontological symmetry (cf. Callon, 1986) between this understanding of bodily scars and that of scarred objects. Our memories of the past co-constitute who we are at present, and hence the concept of the organisational self stems, in part, from our (memory-based and contemporaneous) relationships with organisational entities, both objects and people. This idea is exemplified in the way that curated fragments of objects 'speak' to museum visitors (Fyfe and Ross, 1996), or how objects imbued with memories come to be seen as extensions of our bodies (Belk, 1988; Tian and Belk, 2005), and in the ways that everyday things are part of our autobiographical archives (Hoskins, 1998). As such, we extend the original corporeal-oriented concept of a scar – an embodiment of one's relationship with a concrete and real world, transformed through representational accounts – to explore the role of scarred objects in workers' sense of memory and heritage at work.

These ideas contribute to the framework for explaining how scarred objects anchor a sense of self and establish a sense of belonging at work, which has paramount significance as we continue to move towards greater flexibility in contemporary work, in the context of 'liquid modernity' – defined here as the manifestible transitoriness of social bonds, including those underpinning (liquid) modern organisations (Bauman, 2000). The 'liquid organisation' may materialise in different ways (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2014), yet all are imbued by the inherent lack of stability (resonating with the social world surrounding them) which renders their structures volatile and not 'keeping their shape for long' (Bauman, 2007: 1). Temporariness and the transience of work, often resulting from flexibility pressures (Purcell et al., 2011), may obstruct the possibility of drawing on existing social and material resources to 'construct new understandings' (Lervik et al., 2010: 300). In this fluid context, even the job-

specific skills and competences may not provide enough bedrock for stabilising a person's sense of work and ensuring their bearings are clear (Borg and Söderlund, 2015). This lack of stability is noted in our data below. In the era of clear desk policies, sterile communal workplaces and sanitised offices, to remove the scars of organisational life, we argue, is to forget and puts individual bearings, such as memories, personal archives and remembrances in jeopardy.

Field study and method

This paper has been developed from a wider nine-month study examining how workers construct a sense of identity in relation to space and place. The study was located in five UK hair salons, based in Bath, Worcester, and London, and included 43 hairdressers. Data was collected using participant-led photography (Pink, 2007; Radley and Taylor, 2003; Warren, 2002, 2005). This method was chosen since it aligned with the ontological and epistemological foundations of the wider study; the concern being with the participant's subjectivity and individual experience of the material world of work. Such methodological choice foregrounded the participant's voice (Warren, 2002, 2005), helped their experiences to be communicated (Strangleman, 2014; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), and created a more balanced power dynamic between the participant and researcher (Ray and Smith, 2012). By placing the camera in the hands of the participants, the method offered them an opportunity to explore the often intangible parts of their organisational worlds – such as identity, memory and belonging – rather than relying on textual narratives alone (Jensen et al., 2007).

As part of the participant brief, the hairdressers were asked to capture photographs of the material parts of their workplace that said something about 'who they are at work'. Each participant captured around 12–15 images. Over 500 photographs were made as part of the

overall study, with around 65 of these relating to scarred objects. Other images related to additional themes including privacy at work, spaces for inspiration, and gift-giving in the workplace.

These data were then subject to qualitative analysis from which key themes were established. The method of analysis for this study integrated the meanings given to the photographs by participants (textual narratives) and the content of the photographs themselves/ what they are of (visual narratives). The first part of this tripartite analytical process included 'photographer-led meaning attribution', where photographs were coded according to the meanings given to them by participants. The principles guiding this part of the process are rooted in the ethical commitment to the participant's voice – the meaning is not 'in' the image, the photographer needs to explain its significance (Wang and Burris, 1997). This took place within a semi-structured interview. Participants had the opportunity to look at their images as printed hard copies or digitally on a laptop and all chose to look at the printed images, taking time to talk about each one of their pictures in turn – the meanings they held and why they captured them. The second part of this analytical process included 'theming'. Transcripts from each interview were produced and initial memos recorded as part of the preliminary reading of these texts (Saldaña, 2012). Codes were grounded in the data to preserve the inductive participant-centred character of the research. For example, and in relation to the data presented in this paper, codes such as 'working hard', 'evidence of hard work', 'putting in the hours', and 'grafting' were assigned to relevant parts of the transcriptions during analysis. This coding process led to the development of the theme *Years of hard graft.* The other themes discussed in this paper, *Memories of social relationships* and *Overcoming painful pasts* emerged in the same way.

The final part of this tripartite analysis was 'researcher-led pattern analysis'. If, as Saldaña suggests, the analysis of interview transcripts may be part of 'first cycle coding' (2012), then

this final stage could be seen as part of the 'second cycle', where unexpected discoveries may emerge (Saldaña, 2012; Lindof and Taylor, 2011). At this stage, all the photographs within a theme (e.g. years of hard graft) were grouped together as an image-set, re-examined, and their visual contents analysed based on what was captured in the image. This was an important part of the visual analysis as it allowed the images to be brought back into the analytical process, as opposed to simply being used as prompts for talk during the photo-interviews. The images in the *'Years of hard graft'* theme (and others in this paper) were viewed in their entirety and a 'final exposure to the whole' (Collier, 2001: 44) allowed for patterns to be seen and similarities and differences to be acknowledged. It is at this stage we ask: what material objects has the participant/ photographer used to communicate their meaning? For example, the contents of the images associated with the '*Years of hard graft'* theme included scuffed and marked floors, battered corners of workstations, chipped paint on walls – and thus the notion of scarred objects emerged.

Findings: scuff and scars as 'time marks'

Throughout the photo-interviews the hairdressers talked about objects they had photographed and discussed the pictures of their time marks (Walsh, 1992) – scuffed floors, stained cardigans and battered workstations. The hairdressers talked about how these imperfections were reminders of both positive and sometimes less-positive aspects of their working worlds. Their stories were occasionally paradoxical in nature – objects are at the same time loved and associated with fond memories, as well as sources of concern and embarrassment. Throughout these data there is a sense of how the hairdressers archive their careers and workplace memories and relationships, through and with the marks on these objects. They speak of evidencing work and labour, the people they work with – both colleagues and clients – and historical aspects of their careers that represent challenges and difficulties faced in the past.

Following the process of visual and textual narrative analysis described above, three key themes emerged from these data: *Years of hard graft; Memories of social relationships; and Overcoming painful pasts*. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect anonymity.

Years of hard graft: A salon owner and hairdresser in Worcester, Ali, took pictures of her salon floor. Years of hard work are evidenced in the crescent moon shaped scar on the floor around her hairdressing chair. There is a sense of pride that emerges from her story and something deeply connected to her sense of workplace identity as she describes the image in picture 1 below:

> *'Oh gosh, look at that! ...this is me! This is all my hard work over the years'* Ali spent a few moments looking at this image and holding it. She said: *'I think I've got really mixed feelings about this one. Hmmm…it's a bit of a mess isn't it? Shabby. But that's a love. I've had it a long time. Lots of memories…lots of hard work'*

INSERT PICTURE 1 ABOUT HERE

During the research, the salon had a 'makeover', as Ali put it, and she replaced the floor with new lino. Ali said, '*The salon looks smarter…but I miss that* [the mark on the floor] *…I feel sad it has gone*'. There is a realisation that the scuff mark was in some ways used to construct a sense of self – '*this is me*' – and it has been airbrushed out of existence leaving behind a yearning for what was once a mark of work.

Other hairdressers also took pictures of the floors in their salons – Tina took a picture of the stains on the carpet of her salon, located in her own home in Bath, and Adam, a senior stylist, took a picture of the worn wooden floor in his salon, in London. Much like Ali, they had conflicting feelings about these marks. There was a sense of pride in relation to the hard work

these marks represent and one that is attached to the sense of working hard and evidencing productivity and effort over time.

Tina says (Picture 2): '*Well it doesn't look great, but that's a day's work right here! I'm so busy, there is no time to clear up. It shows I've done something today…'.*

Adam says (Picture 3): '*A salon like ours shouldn't really have a floor like this. It doesn't look that good, it's a bit tattered now. But we get a lot of traffic through here and there are people here, y'know. It's like, we're busy…so this happens. So, looking at it, I guess it shows we work hard'.*

INSERT PICTURE 2 ABOUT HERE

INSERT PICTURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Michael, a senior stylist in a London salon took a picture of his workstation (the salon equivalent of an office desk). As one of the most senior stylists in the salon, he worked regularly at this particular workstation and as part of the move to the salon some years ago, had been invited to choose where he worked, unlike others. He pointed to the edge of the workstation pictured below (Picture 4), and said:

'I love my section; I love it because it's got battered corners. It's like a working man's section…look at how battered it is, you can see the corners, and you can see it's had a lot of traffic. It's like a war zone, but I love it. I know it might look like a mess and its scruffy and a bit of a state, but no one has ever complained…and I have some high-end clients. I think it says a lot…that I have never slowed down, y'know. I've never given up, I've never slowed down, and so that's me right there.'

INSERT PICTURE 4 ABOUT HERE

There is a real sense of pride in Michael's narrative – the battered corners of his work section symbolise hard work and being busy, resonating with Ali's feelings of pride. For Michael, the mess and the *'state of the section'* are illustrative of *'never giving up'* and the battered corners

are representative of his longevity in the hairdressing industry. There is also a connection to gender here as Michael refers to his workstation being *'a working man's section'* and we see rather archetypal masculine references to *'traffic'* and the mess and battered nature of the desk making it a *'war zone'*. Indeed, the intimacy of the relationship with the object is emphasised by the punchline, placing Michael, as it were, *within* the object – *'that's me right there'*.

The common theme across these data are the stories they tell of hard work. The hairdressers are at pains to describe how these scars show how busy they have been over long periods of time. These scuffs have a sense of longevity about them and are the material, physical evidence of how demanding and physical this work can be. They have literally worn out the floor and desks have been battered and dented.

Memories of social relationships: Other hairdressers took photographs of marks on objects that said something about who they work with and explained how these marks remind them of significant people in their working lives. For example, Hannah, an experienced hairdresser in a Bath salon said:

> *'So, this is a picture of Emma's lipstick mark on one of our glasses. It makes me laugh. I love it. It makes me smile when I look at this. It's like, you look round the staffroom and see this and you know exactly where she's been, that she's here, y'know. Like…that she's just around. It's like a trademark…the lipstick mark is her trademark. That, and a can of hairspray! I guess I like it because it reminds me that I work with good people, fun people.'*

INSERT PICTURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Rather like that line in Nat King Cole's song, *'These Foolish Things (remind me of you)'* – '*a cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces'* (Strachey and Maschwitz, 1935), we see here how the mundane and ordinary traces in the workplace can remind us of others.

Other hairdressers captured similar images of mundane marks associated with people and were specifically reminded of clients. Tim, a junior hairdresser in training in a large London salon captured a picture of the pencil scribbles and '*mess*' he likes in the junior's training appointment diary. He said:

> *'Well this is the junior's diary…we write all the appointments for our training sessions…so if someone calls, you can book them in here with whoever is training that evening. I've put it on a blank page here so you can't see the names, but it's a mess inside. Stuff gets written in, rubbed out, rearranged …people scribble on it and stuff. It's just for the juniors. But I like the mess, it makes me think of all the people you meet'.*

INSERT PICTURE 6 ABOUT HERE

Other, more experienced stylists, like Emma, a stylist working at a salon in Bath, talked about clients, the stains on her clothes and the meanings these marks had for her. Specifically, she referred to the bleach spots on her cardigan:

> *'My cardigan…it's covered in lots of little bleach stains. I love this cardigan because it's comfortable to work in and I've had it ages. It probably doesn't look that professional in a salon like ours but it's kind of my work cardigan and all these little spots on it… it kind of reminds me of all my clients and all the times I've done their hair, and all the conversations we've had…'*

INSERT PICTURE 7 ABOUT HERE

These objects – a water glass, a diary, a cardigan – are all ordinary objects in everyday organisations. But it is the scars on their surfaces, be they short-lived like the lipstick mark or rather more enduring like the bleach spots on the well-loved cardigan, that say something about the memories and histories of client conversations and relationships with others. While typically for the service sector, most encounters are transitory and sweeping, as hairdressers

move on from one client to another, the featured objects help to contextualise the evoked relationship, thus anchoring it in one's memory.

Overcoming painful pasts: Some of the hairdressers captured objects that had connections with workplace challenges they had faced. They often reflected on their past experiences as trainee/ junior hairdressers or previous points in their working lives. These stories were often associated with struggles and difficulties they had had to overcome. Although couched in a sense of painful and somewhat trying times, their reflections tended to conclude with feelings of achievement, transition, success and learning. For example, Russ, a senior stylist in a London salon, talked about the stained and blemished towels of his early career and how, although they were unpleasant to look at and '*embarrassing in front of clients'*, he still remembers them and uses the memory to remind himself '*how far I've come'*.

Others took pictures of stained colour pots in washing up bowls and stained chairs – all symbols of difficult parts of the job but nonetheless memories and reminders of achievement and career progression. Becky, a newly qualified hairdresser in London took a picture of the salon's old foil cutter that she used as a junior hairdresser (Picture 8 below).

INSERT PICTURE 8 ABOUT HERE

> *'Look at this battered old thing. This is really old school…you get automatic cutters now, but I used to use this. Hours of sitting cutting foils…it's like the most boring job a junior can do…It looks so knackered, all those dents from being bashed about by so many bored juniors! I am so glad I don't have to use that anymore…I'm so glad I'm not a junior anymore!'*

Similarly, Michael captured the image below (Picture 9) and talked about his transition through a difficult period in his career as a hairdresser.

'I see this around the salon all the time and it stains everything! It's this particular type of hair dye and this could ruin my career…I'm allergic to it. But it also reminds me that I am still working, I have struggled with it, but I am still here. I have to take care of my hands, but I love working here and I won't give up'

INSERT PICTURE 9 ABOUT HERE

These stained and tattered items have a memory-anchoring power: through enabling an access to times gone by and taking the hairdressers to another place-time in their work histories, allowing them to reflect on their sense of self. Although there is a sense of difficulty associated with these narratives, there is also a glimpse of satisfaction in being reminded '*how far I've come', 'I'm not a junior anymore'* or '*that I am still working'*.

The sentiments throughout these data reflect the notion that we often refer to scars as 'biographical' in the sense that they connect us with past experiences and are at times referred to as 'battle wounds' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 29). Thus, scars being reminders of both our vulnerability, as well as resilience when facing adversity (Weitz, 2011), enable us to construct an overall encouraging storyline evoking a sense of continuity of what might otherwise be perceived as a series of separate events. We now turn to examine the different ways in which those stories become meaningful to us using Burnett and Holmes' framework, and then explore their importance in the organisational context of liquid modernity.

Discussion: the blemished face of work

'To be alive at all is to have scars' John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent, 1961/2008: 101.

The photo-narratives presented above demonstrate how scarred objects play a role in anchoring workers' sense of identity – anchors for the self-historicising subject (Hoskins, 1998). Our data

has shown how they are used as material resources for evidencing hard work over time, relationships with others, and achievements in the face of past adversities, helping to counter the temporariness and constant change that characterises liquid modern life (Bauman, 2000). We have seen how the scuff marks and remnants of hair on salon floors are proof of work and verify hard labour over the course of time. How traces of lipstick, scribbles and stains support the hairdressers' memories of those they work with or for. How other marked objects are indicators of perseverance over time that remind the hairdressers how far they have come in their careers.

These are the hairdressers' 'scar accounts' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 27). The blemished fragments of their organisational landscapes provide them with 'time marks' (Walsh, 1992) – marks in the material world that make time visible – through which they can subjectively locate themselves in time and place in different ways. Usefully, Burnett and Holmes suggest three lenses through which we might examine scars as links to our personal histories and here we use these ideas. Because we liken the surface of an object to the surface of the body, these lenses help unpick the significance of the narratives presented above. Burnett and Holmes acknowledge the three lenses they use are not discrete to one another (and indeed areas of commonality have emerged in the analysis of our own data). The lenses are:

1. 'Telling good stories' – scars are used to construct stories and give a particular impression. A scar account allows a telling of a 'good story' where the 'past is reimagined for present consumption' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 34).
2. 'Taking care' – scars as signs of heritage; something to 'value' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 22). As such, scars on the body promote meaningful reflections and importantly are associated with reminders that we must 'take care' of ourselves.

3. 'Remembered pasts' – scars here are about the social construction of identity with and through others. Scars situate a person 'doing memorable things', and relationships with others are part of that account (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 31).

Burnett and Holmes suggest that 'telling good stories' about the scars on our bodies connects to the idea that our bodies are a 'site of promotional artefacts' (2001: 27) and what some people do when they talk about their scars is to construct a past that helps conjure up a particular impression of themselves (Goffman, 1959). We can see the hairdressers doing this in relation to the scuffs on their salon floors, in a similar way to how Schultz Klein et al. (1995) propose objects characterise 'me'. Ali, for example, uses the crescent moon scuff around her chair to tell a story of 'me' – '*this is me'*, she says. All the stories of scuffed floors communicate how hard working these hairdressers are, as professionals. They are using the 'scar' to present a certain sort of productive, industrious self and the stories crafted around this help us, as an audience to appreciate that. It is also worth noting the paradox here: at the same time as being proud of these scars and associating them with a sense of evidencing hard work, there are notes of embarrassment and shame – at the shabby impression these scars give to their workplaces. This gives further weight to the similarities we are drawing in relation to scars on the body: after all, most of the literature examining scars on the body is associated with shame and disfigurement (for example Burriss et al, 2009; Coughlan and Clarke, 2002; Goffman, 1963).

Furthermore, Burnett and Holmes propose that telling good stories about our scars can also be linked to notions of bravado or 'machismo' (2001: 28) in order to invoke a sense of rebelliousness and danger – these sorts of stories can impress and make a 'good' story. There are echoes of this in Michael's narrative. In resonance with Weitz's (2011) work on the gendered nature of scars, Michael refers to his workstation being *'a working man's section'* with archetypal masculine references to the battered nature of the desk making it a *'war zone'*.

Similarly, some studies point towards the sorts of narratives men historically construct in relation to their scars – often orientated around battle wounds, a sense of masculinity and stoicism in the face of adversity (Burriss et al, 2009; Connell, 2005). Likewise, masculine notions are replicated again in the stories later, from Russ and Michael, about objects that reflect overcoming painful pasts. Their stories of stained artefacts in the workplace represent professional battles fought – and won – and the stories seem to hold a 'touch of bravado' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 28). As Hoskins (1998: 24) might agree, this makes the storytelling all the more striking and enables us to better understand how these people negotiate their identities and construct their own biographies.

Understanding how these scarred objects' stories give a particular impression of our hairdressers can be informed by Burnett and Holmes' second lens – 'taking care'. Here, scars are signs of heritage and they are something to 'value' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 22). Scars on the body promote meaningful reflections and importantly are associated with reminders that we must 'take care' of ourselves. We argue, therefore, in the context of scarred objects in the hairdresser's lives, that scuffs and remnants of hair on the floor are somewhat stark reminders that this work is hard graft – '*that's a day's work right here! I'm so busy, there is no time to clear up'* (Tina). The hairdressers meaningfully reflect on these scars and realise the physical exertion this job requires. Likewise, Michael's narrative on the hair dye he is allergic to draws parallels with physical suffering and brings to mind Belk's (1988) suggestion of continuity between objects and our bodies. Burnett and Holmes note that scars remind us of our limitations and that scars are 'visible reminders' that bodies can fail (2001: 26). We see evidence of Michael's limitations and rather poignantly here, it *is* the body – his hands – that has suffered, and as such he has had to learn how to manage this and be the guardian of his own corporeality (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 26). This implies that Michael recognises his own vulnerability here, which, in contrast to his masculine narratives that we discussed above, points to perhaps

a more feminine trait. We might argue then, that multiple interpretations can be associated with the same scarred object – the sense of machismo and vulnerability are enfolded in the same scar.

Finally, the third lens through which Burnett and Holmes suggest we examine scars is 'remembered pasts'. This is where a scar situates a person 'doing memorable things', and relationships with others are part of that account (2001: 31). The data above mirrors Burnett and Holmes' argument that scars are similar to Walsh's (1992) time marks and act as resources for situating and reflecting on our socio-cultural experiences – like Hannah's story of the lipstick mark. This points to the significance of social ties located in the seemingly insignificant mark of lipstick left on a glass by one of her colleagues and highlights how this mark fleetingly anchors her to the social memories and emotional attachments at work. Rather like Turkle's chipped rolling pin (2011) this emphasises the social embeddedness as another premise through which the anchoring process can be mediated. We see further evidence of these relationships and the 'doing of memorable things' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 30) in the pencil scribbles in Tim's diary, and the flecks and stains of bleach on Emma's cardigan. These marks have 'made time 'visible'' (Walsh, 1992: 152) and therefore memorable. These scarred objects become material archives of client conversations and relationships. They provide the hairdressers with a resource – be it fleeting (like pencil marks) or rather more enduring (like bleach marks) – through which to remember and reflect on those they work with, and those with whom they have built relationships. In this vein, past events construed via scarred objects in terms of overcoming their protracted and painful aspects, endow them with a sense of unifying (if somber) discourse, and thus with a sense of continuity they might otherwise be lacking.

Therefore, what might be construed by others as wear and tear, mess, or 'the bad and the ugly' are, for these workers at least, fragments that embody their legacy (Burnett and Holmes, 2001:

30). It is worth noting here, however, that Burnett and Holmes' framework and indeed other studies in the field of scarred bodies consider bodily scars as permanent – they may fade over time, but they endure (Weitz, 2011). Of course, here we are exploring scarred objects which, as we defined earlier, are non-permanent and replaceable features of or within an organisation. We might suggest then, given our data, that scarred objects might vary in their (non)permanence according to how durable (or not) the object might be. Some scarred objects may perhaps come across as more durable in proportion to how enduring their underlying imperfections are – like the scarred floors we have seen. Whereas other scarred objects take on a more temporary feel – like the lipstick mark on the glass. Although we do not have the space in this paper to explore the potential variability of scarred objects and how they can be differently construed in the context of work, this is perhaps an area of further research that could be extended.

Table 1 (below) includes the mapping of original lenses from Burnett and Holmes' framework against our empirical material.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Having established how different scuffs and stains manifest as scarred objects and how they represent time marks – in an autobiographical sense – we now turn to consider what this means in a wider context and establish why the proposed micro-examination of the material working world is relevant to the broader setting of organisation studies. As we set out at the start of this paper, we intend to contribute to the existing literature by evidencing just how important scarred objects are as we move towards greater flexibility in contemporary work, in the context of liquid modernity – the fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change, which characterises modern life (Bauman, 2000). Not arguing for any special role of hairdressing in this context, we would like to note that the empirical setting in this article is

one that reflects the fluid, transitory nature of work, which – both in time and space terms – has the hallmarks so characteristic of many contemporary liquid organisations.

The very nature of hairdressing work is temporary. As soon as hair is cut it begins to grow again, and the relational aspect of hairdressers' work is equally as fluid. As Black (2004) reminds us, a key feature of work across the hair and beauty industry is the relational, emotional engagement with clients – being a sounding board, counsellor, coach and confidant forms a significant part of the work involved. But as such, this work is transitory and passing and can be seen as invisible and immaterial (Hatton, 2017). The very outcome and product of hairdressers' labour is transitory and impermanent; once cut and blow dried, a client walks out the door and no doubt a day or two later, that careful meticulous blow dry is washed out. Hours are spent crafting intricate up-dos with curlers, pins and tongs, only to last one night before the work is undone and unpinned. Other evidence of work is left in the salon but only momentarily (given the importance of cleanliness and luxury in such spaces) – cut hair that has fallen to the floor is swept away, used foils are binned, and hair dye washed out. This fleeting labour typically unfolds in shared, fluid and transparent workspaces – where work is done at standardised workstations (rather like office work in many contemporary organisations). The salons themselves have largely been designed with clients in mind – a stage set for perfection and relaxation, where the 'correct image' of the organisation is one of spotlessness and luxury. What is left, then, with any sense of permanence, are these battered corners and worn out floors and despite the hairdresser's admissions that these may be aesthetically seen as shabby, they are perhaps the last remnants of how they evidence work and anchor a sense of identity and time in relation to their days and years of hard labour: material from which scarred objects are weft.

Vitally, this scarred geography of the workplace enables these workers to achieve a sense of continuity, permanence and social embeddedness. This is fundamental in the context of liquid organisations. Indeed, turning our attention to knowledge workers, we see similar struggles with regards to contemporary experiences of fluidity. As insecurity, depersonalisation and displacement are played out in spatial terms, we live in the era of the 'disappearing workplace' (Dale and Burrell, 2008: 117), where a fixed and stable sense of work and place of work is eroded by the 'valorization of liquidity'. We see the removal of permanent desks (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Galinsky and Tahmincioglu, 2014), the increase of working at or in multiple sites (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Felstead et al, 2005; Steyaert and Katz, 2004) and any attempts at marking such spaces in a sustained manner may be read as incompatible with the dominant discourses of flexibility and the organisations' conscious effort to support it. This is often evidenced during spatial change initiatives, where attempts to control employee behaviour in work spaces and keep them mobile are established through office etiquette rules and protocols around desk management and the display (or not) of personal items (e.g. Burrell, 2011; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Donald, 1994; Elsbach and Bechky, 2007). Then, there is a sanitising effect to our organisational environments, cleaned of the contaminants of individual worker identities, since these often do not fit the corporate ideal (Hancock, 2003).

This is perhaps the material manifestation of organisational amnesia; to remove the scars of organisational life and paint over the wear and tear is to forget and puts individual memories and personal archives in jeopardy. It commits vital time marks to organisational oblivion (Ciuk and Kostera, 2010), rendering past unusable (Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020) and as such obstructs the very prospects for learning, continuity, belonging and connection organisations are attempting to establish in contemporary organisational life.

This sanitising approach to the workplace arguably attempts to hide any trace of life, experience, history, relationships, or memories. In continuing to draw parallels with the body as we have done above, we may liken this to Featherstone's (1991: 92) argument that contemporary bodies must be 'fit' for societal consumption and those who do not conform to or maintain (certainly Western) standards of beauty will be rejected. Rather like Foucault suggests, we may 'get undressed – but be slim, good looking and tanned' (1980: 57), and so perhaps we now find ourselves in the spatial equivalent of this notion. Contemporary organisational artefacts and spaces must be cleaned up in order to project the 'right' image, and much like wear and tear of the body, this must be tamed, concealed, filled, and erased. Indeed, as we noted above and as Goffman suggests (1963), disfigurement and scars 'spoil' and shame a sense of identity and would be read by others as socially unattractive. Scars thus, from an organisational point of view, are to be removed, because these sanitised workplaces do not readily allow employees the ability to display identity (Morrison and Macky, 2017). Yet, as we have established in this paper, objects are physical identity markers (Elsbach, 2004), and crucial elements in the display of identity at work; an affirmation of identity is achieved, in part, through an employee's ability to display objects and mark their space (Warren, 2006). In addition, as we evidence above, everyday objects may provoke memories and are imbued with life histories.

However, we continue to create and make spaces that depersonalise. Indeed, and as a result, Elsbach (2004) warns that in the case of employees working in non-territorial workplaces, if the display of objects cannot be realised, a loss of identity is felt. In a similar vein, shared open workspaces can force workers to seek solace at the edges and on the periphery of work, and create informal territories (Shortt, 2015). But it is in our data that we reveal how workers draw on the material elements of the working world at a micro-level in order to regain this sense of identity. Therefore, rather than contributing to the discussion on the extent to which the display

of personal items at work is permitted or condoned (Lai et al., 2002; Wells, et al, 2007), we focus on the anchoring power of non-personal, work-related and mundane objects, which can be (and so far – typically – are in the work studies context) easily overlooked as insignificant. Their 'scars' may be considered crucial individualising features, enabling workers to differentiate between allegedly identical objects and standardised workspaces, and help them navigate their way through these sanitised spaces.

Conclusions: Beware the airbrushed workplace

The aim of this paper was to develop a new area of material studies at a micro-level and extend our understanding of objects in the workplace, demonstrate how scarred objects anchor workers' sense of memory and history, and show how important scarred objects are as we move towards greater flexibility in contemporary work, in the context of liquid modernity. First, unlike most accounts discussing the importance of objects in the workplace, we have explored mundane objects and those which belong to the workplace setting, rather than the ones that are owned. This has enabled us to focus on that which is hidden in plain sight. We have shown how the importance of our everyday countless interactions with work-related objects, which despite (objectively speaking) being 'normal', become vehicles for meaning mediating our attachment to work. In scrutinising these objects at a micro-level, our empirical material enabled us to show how the disfigurement of these everyday objects renders them fertile bedrock for narrative accounts capturing various aspects of this connection to a workplace: people, places and past events. By extending Burnett and Holmes' framework for discussing bodily scars into a workplace setting, we have demonstrated different ways in which scarred objects anchor workers' sense of memory and heritage. In that respect, we have proposed that the prominent threads underpinning scarred object accounts include personal vulnerability, sense of permanency, social embeddedness and continuity.

We have also shown how important those threads are as we move towards greater flexibility in contemporary work, in the context of liquid modernity. These powerful and often underappreciated scarred objects are used by workers to navigate and mitigate the sanitised, temporary, airbrushed working world. These findings are in direct opposition to the makeover genre we currently find ourselves within, where the 'disappearing workplace' (Dale and Burrell, 2008: 117), and a fixed and stable sense of work is being removed in favour of 'liquidity' and transience. Increasingly we see organisations and their material worlds presented as unblemished spaces in order to impress clients, customers, future employees, and for the benefit of attracting new graduates (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Certainly, we might argue that offices now somewhat resemble operating theatres and the plethora of co-working spaces booming in cities all over the world, designed to cater for the ultimate flexible, mobile and temporary worker (Blagoev et al, 2019; Daniel and Chadwick, 2016; Garrett et al, 2017;) are therefore spotless spaces that accommodate anyone at any time – thus devoid of any sense of individual, embodied identity. We are also, therefore, contributing to a counter narrative against the move towards privileging spotless, sanitised, flexible workspaces.

As a consequence of the findings in this paper, we therefore need to increase the attention we give to the material 'stuff' in organisation studies. It is at our peril that we continue to airbrush the human out of organisational life. In the pursuit of transient, fluid workspaces that speak to the liquidity of modern life, and the quest for refurbishment and maintenance of shiny new workplaces, we are forgetting the autobiographical archives that are located in the scuffs and stains around us.

In the same way as removing, covering or concealing scars aims to 'deny our own body histories' (Burnett and Holmes, 2001: 34), the same can be said for the removal of or the lack of attention to the scarred objects of work. Comparatively then, to remove them from the site

of work may mean denying workers the resources with which to make sense of their attachments or belonging. Just as scarred bodies are sites of survival, resistance, and pride (Frank, 1991; Weitz, 2011; www.thescarproject.org), so too are organisations and by taking away the possibility for workers to relate to such experiences via scars, present or past, means removing the very essence and evidence of work, thus putting in jeopardy vital components through which we define ourselves in this context. As Urry (1996) advocates, it is only through remembering the past and acknowledging our life histories that we are able to improve, learn from, and plan for the future.

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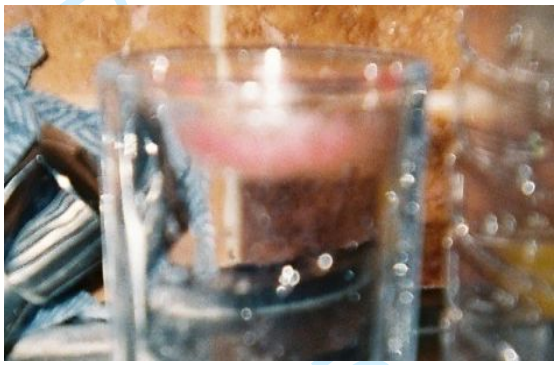
Picture 1. Ali's scuff mark on the salon floor

Picture 2. Stains/ hair on Tina's salon floor. **Picture 3.** Scuffs on Adam's salon floor

Picture 4. Michael's battered corners **Picture 5.** Emma's lipstick mark



Picture 6. Tim's picture of the junior's diary. **Picture 7.** Emma's picture of bleach stains on her cardigan

Picture 8. Becky's picture of a foil cutter

Picture 9. Michael's picture of hair dye

Theme	**Data**	**Link to Burnett and Holmes (2001)**
Years of hard graft	Picture 1. Ali's scuff mark on the salon floor	Telling good stories/ Taking care
Years of hard graft	Picture 2. Stains/ hair on Tina's salon floor	Telling good stories / Taking care
Years of hard graft	Picture 3. Scuffs on Adam's salon floor	Telling good stories / Taking care
Years of hard graft	Picture 4. Michael's battered corners of his work section	Telling good stories/ Taking care
Memories of social relationships	Picture 5. Hannah's picture of Emma's lipstick mark on a glass	Remembered pasts
Memories of social relationships	Picture 6: Tim's picture of the junior's diary	Remembered pasts
Memories of social relationships	Picture 7: Emma's picture of bleach stains on her cardigan	Remembered pasts
Overcoming painful pasts	Picture 8: Becky's picture of a foil cutter	Remembered pasts
Overcoming painful pasts	Picture 9: Michael's picture of hair dye	Telling good stories/ Taking care/Remembered pasts

Table 1. Links between hairdressers' scarred objects and Burnett and Holmes' (2001) framework