

# Reusing Textiles: On Material and Cultural Wear and Tear

By Anneli Palmsköld

## Abstract

This article discusses contemporary practices in a Swedish context, connected to clothes and home textiles that are no longer in use, comparing them to reusing practices from the middle of the nineteenth century and onwards. The focus is on how the textiles are objects for different sorting processes in private homes as well as on a flea market, and people's ethical concerns connected to these processes. Until the early 1970s the skills of mending, altering and patching was common knowledge, to women at least. The reusing processes were about wear and tear considerations from a material point of view. Today there are many more clothing and home textiles items in circulation, which have to be taken care of. To handle and sort textiles seems, among other things, to be about coping with different feelings connected with guilt and bad conscience. To avoid these feelings people are seeking ways of letting the textiles circulate in order to be reused by others.

**Keywords:** Reusing textiles, material wear and tear, cultural wear and tear, sorting processes

## Reusing, Recycling and Circulation

Issues concerning reusing, recycling and circulation of second hand items are widely discussed and highlighted in Sweden today. Flea markets and thrift shops owned by non-profit organizations are organizing systems for receiving things that people no longer need in order to sell them to their customers (see for example [www.myrorna.se](http://www.myrorna.se)).<sup>1</sup> The things circulating on this market are often reused as they are, cleaned and repaired to be used again, and from a metaphorical point of view they can live a second life ([www.sustainabilitydictionary.com](http://www.sustainabilitydictionary.com)). Another option is to recycle them, that is when waste materials are used to create new products as when on an industrial level materials such as used plastics are transformed to polyester (ibid.; McDonough & Braungart 2002). Recycling processes also take place on a craft or design level when people make new things from wasted ones. Among younger people an increasing interest in sustainability and how to live a fair life can be noticed, often connected to DIY (Do It Yourself) tips and tricks on how to reuse objects or recycle material (see for example [www.365slojd.se](http://www.365slojd.se) and [www.slojdhaller.se](http://www.slojdhaller.se); Watson & Shove 2008; Åhlvik & von Busch 2009). To practice a fair and sustainable life means for this group to buy second hand, or newly produced quality products that will last for a long time. Professional designers are interested in creating products that are sustainable, and turning second hand and vintage objects to desired commodities by redesigning and remaking them in an upcycling process is a frequent part in developing business (Thorpe 2008, Grundström 2014, [www.stadsmissionen.se/Secondhand-Remake/](http://www.stadsmissionen.se/Secondhand-Remake/); [www.beyondretro.se](http://www.beyondretro.se)). The upcycling part means that discarded things or materials are converted to something of higher quality or value (McDonough & Braungart 2002; von Busch 2007: 82ff).

There are more things in circulation today than a few decades ago. When it comes to textiles, this is a consequence of an escalating production of clothing and textiles. At the same time consumption has increased. The concept called fast fashion, when clothes are designed, produced and displayed every sixth week and not by season as earlier, is dominating the market (Black 2010: 2f). Clothing is also relatively cheaper today (ibid.: 1). On an individual level, the more clothes one consumes, the more one has to store, and questions on what to keep and what to sort out from the wardrobe are a recurring concern in people's everyday life (Palmsköld 2010, 2012 and 2013). At the same time many find it hard to throw away textiles that could be used, and instead they are trying to find ways to make them circulate (ibid. 2013).

In this article contemporary practices connected to clothes and home textiles that are no longer in use will be discussed, and compared to reusing practices from the middle of the nineteenth century and onwards (ibid. 2013).<sup>2</sup> The focus will be on how the textiles are objects for different sorting processes in private homes as well as on the second hand market, and people's ethical concerns con-

nected to these processes will be discussed. The main questions asked are: Why do many people find it hard to throw away their used textiles? What do they instead do with their worn out clothes or home textiles? Which changes and stabilities in the textile wear and tear can be noticed from a historical perspective since the 1950s and until now?<sup>3</sup>

## Sorting Processes

In the affluent parts of the world, consumers can allow themselves “to get tired of things” before they become worn out and let them recirculate to be useful to others (Åkesson 2005: 141). Many objects that are sold on the second hand market are examples of this phenomenon. When it comes to clothing, for example, one can find clothes for sale that are in good material condition and could be functional for many seasons to come, but by the previous owner defined as impossible to wear. This is an example of cultural wear and tear, a process leading objects to be considered as old, hopelessly passé or even to be abandoned (see Löfgren 2005). In addition, when objects are categorized as useful or not useful, considerations based on visual as well as functional aspects play a significant part. An old hand woven linen cloth or an embroidered curtain is one example of objects that can be defined from a functional point of view. These kinds of textiles have to be taken care of in ways that many find time consuming and demanding, and even old fashioned. They might also be considered difficult to incorporate and use as part of the home decoration. Instead of saving them, on an individual level a solution for these kinds of textiles could be to sort them out and donate them to flea markets or thrift shops. Cultural reasons for classifying or sorting out material objects such as textiles can be considered as an opposite position to material reasons, that is for example when fabrics actually are worn out or damaged in different ways.

Sorting processes are central when we manage and categorize objects. As Strasser points out, “[t]rash is created by sorting” (1999: 5). But there is a differentiated scale between opposite categories such as “useful” and “trash”, and, which the following text argues, most of the objects in sorting processes examined within the context of the study that this text is based on end up somewhere between. A typical scenario when it comes to clothes and home textiles, is that the starting point is in the private sphere, in front of the closet or linen cupboard, when people are inspecting their clothes and home textiles visually and sensorial to determine their future fate. As shown below, the textiles are sorted in different categories and some of them presumably land on one of many flea markets run by charity organizations. The sorting process continues at the flea markets that have several stations and opportunities for each individual garment, fabric or curtain. Estimation is that approximately 10 % of the textiles that are donated are actually sold, and thus the remaining 90 % are separated and have to be taken care of in some way or another (Palmsköld 2013).

## Methods

When working as a volunteer on a local flea market, described in some detail below, it became clear to me that textile was a material category that stood out from the rest. First, most of the things donated were textiles. Second, as a consequence of this, among the volunteers taking care of the donations one always had to make sure one person alone was taking care of all the textiles. And third it was apparent that donors wanted their disposed things to circulate and to be useful for somebody else. This made me curious, and I wanted to learn more about the processes in action, the practices people are involved in and their concerns about their worn out clothes and home textiles. In order to study this phenomenon I continued to be a volunteer worker, but this time I was an ethnological researcher doing fieldwork by participating in all different processes of sorting things that took place on the flea market. Taking part in the work together with other volunteers made it possible to learn the practices and routines connected with handling and sorting donated things. At the same time it was possible to ask questions or to discuss issues connected to the sorting processes. During the fieldwork notes were taken in a diary, which grew to a story about what had happened during the work, which tasks that every working period included, discussions that took place, questions that were asked and analytical points that were made (Field diary 2009). The fieldwork focused on sorting processes that take place after textiles have been donated. To be able to analyze the first step, namely what happens in people's private homes when they are sorting textiles, I used a common ethnological method involving cooperation with the Archive at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm. The archive has since the 1920s sent out questionnaires to informants who have agreed to continuously, and on voluntarily basis answer the questions asked on different issues ([www.nordiskamuseet.se](http://www.nordiskamuseet.se)).<sup>4</sup> The questionnaires that have been sent out reflect the cultural historical interest within the museum, from curatorial as well as from collection and documentation perspectives. It also reflects changing ethnological research interests. As the informants are volunteers, they have accepted to contribute to the Nordic Museums work within the cultural historical field.

The questionnaire I had constructed on the reusing textile subject, was sent out, and 94 informants responded to the questions on how they handle their used textiles, mainly focusing on descriptions and reflections on how textiles are sorted, how the sorting processes are organized, and which reusing practices the informants are involved in (Questionnaire 239/2009). The informants were also encouraged to look back, and not only answer the questions from a contemporary perspective. Even though the questionnaire focused on textiles as a material category, information about other objects was welcomed. The material consists mainly of personal stories of every day practices and concerns clothes and home textiles, if other objects are mentioned it is for comparison reasons. The group of informants

consisted of 83 women and 11 men, and a majority of them were born in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

The methods chosen made it possible to follow the different sorting processes connected to textiles starting in people's private homes and ending on a flea market. The questionnaire enabled me to take part of the informants' memories, and therefor to analyze changes as well as stability in the textile wear and tear from the 1950s and until now. What people do with their worn out textiles when sorting them, which they save, how and why textiles are disposed and how people connect to this object category are questions not previously studied.

### **Altering, Patching and Mending**

Until the mid-1900s textile recycling was defined as common house hold practices of repairing, altering, patching, mending and sewing, to be able to economize with scarce resources (Grimstad Klepp 2000, Åkesson 2005: 143). The consumption of textiles was characterized by valuing the quality of the material used, to consider if it would last for a long time, and whether it would be able to be altered and reused. The practices connected to how to reuse textile materials required skill, ability and creativity to be able to use them down to the last piece of fabric or thread. These kinds of reusing practices were closely connected to moral and ethical concerns, and wasting material objects that could be used in one way or another was not an option. Patching and mending textiles was, until the 1970s, an important, and for economic reasons necessary task, occupying the everyday life for most of the women in Sweden. It was actually cheaper to mend clothes and sew new ones than to buy them in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Sweden (Husz 2009: 58). According to a study made in 1961, housewives (including professional working women with families) were sewing approximately five hours per week (ibid.). To be able to understand the historical situation, one has to add that the industrial production of children's and teenagers' clothes was still not developed. Also bed linen had to be sewn on a household level, as they could not be bought on the market.

To be able to provide for all the textiles in a household, knowledge about materials and fibers were needed as well as different skills in patching and mending. Young girls learned these skills from their mothers, grandmothers, aunts or other female members of the household. The schools provided education in needlework for the girls and they were taught different techniques useful for future housewife duties. A frequent pedagogic task was to make samplers that could be saved as memories of technical possibilities when the girls later would be mending and patching by themselves. The samplers showed techniques required for darning stockings, for patching bed linens, tricot underwear, woven woolen fabrics used for costumes and outerwear and fabric used for blouses, shirts, dresses, skirts and pants, and much more. These kinds of skills were taught to schoolgirls in Sweden

until about 1970. At this time many women started working professionally instead of being housewives, and at the same time the production and consumption of clothes and home textiles increased. Children's clothes as well as bed linen could be found on the market, and the home production of these and similar textiles were no longer a necessity. At the same time the previously desired skills in how to practice altering, patching and mending clothing and home textiles became of less importance.

The questionnaire provides a lot of information on this matter. Some informants remember the World War II and the rationing of clothing and textiles that lasted in Sweden, as well as the rest of Europe, for some years after the war. The authorities promoted reusing and recycling activities and courses in how to – in a broader sense – take care of textiles were held for housewives. A common practice was to transform the materials and turn clothes for grownups into clothing for children. As one informant puts it:

I remember well the procedure during that time: old men's suits and overcoats were unstitched using razor blades, put in special holders. The pieces were washed, and eventually dyed. Left to a local tailor, who measured me. When later visiting him, one had to undergo a detailed trying on. (Questionnaire 239: 516).

Clothes and home textiles were highly valued materials that could be used and transformed over and over again. The material quality had to be very high, to sustain a long life and a circulation process including different transformations. Textiles produced today are of lower material quality, often not suitable for this kind of reusing processes, which many informants as well as the voluntary workers in the flea market notices and are concerned of.

## **At Home**

Returning to contemporary society, most of the informants who answered the questionnaire have in detail described the sorting processes that take place in their homes today. To conclude, many say sorting takes place by season, or when moving to new homes, as their bodies have changed sizes, or when the wardrobes are too crowded. One principle mentioned, is sorting out clothes that have not been used for a set period of time, for example for one, three or five years. In fact this is a popular advice given in books about wardrobes and clothing as well as in magazines (see for example von Sydow 2006). A common sorting method is to place the clothes in different piles, for example one for keeping, one for donations, and one for patching and mending. There is another pile that many refer to as the "maybe pile". The content of this pile represent the owner's doubts – will these clothes be used or not, if kept?

During the sorting process lots of decisions has to be made. The clothes, for example, have to be thoroughly assessed. In reusing processes that take place in people's home, clothes are eventually "downgraded", as some informants express

it. At first the clothes are used as formal wear, secondly they are used as everyday clothing, and in the last phase they become work wear for gardening or home renovation. Not until when really worn out, most of the informants think it possible to throw them away in the trash bin. Other forms of circulation mentioned are when worn out textiles are torn to pieces in order to be used as cloths. These are useful when taking care of cars and bikes, cleaning windows, working in the garage, doing trimming and refurbishing, doing painting work, oiling, cleaning, drying, or wiping of wet pets. When the cloths have been used for one of these purposes, the informants allow themselves to throw them away.

Although most of the informants express reluctance to throw away textile objects, there are some exceptions. Categories such as shoes, socks, T-shirts, jeans, scarves, hats and underwear often end up in the trash bin. Clothes that are materially worn out, faded or washed-out can join them. As one informant puts it: "I never throw a complete and usable garment in the trash." (Questionnaire 239: 613). But after sorting out, clothes that have lost their shape, are soiled, ragged or full of holes, to throw them away is a possibility. The examples of clothes mentioned are considered too intimate and personal to give away, as they are worn near the body and close to the skin.

To conclude the informants' stories: from a moral point of view many express that it feels wrong to throw away clothes and home textiles that could be used. When explaining these feelings some express guilt and moral concerns due to the fact that they on one hand want textile objects to circulate, to use and reuse them. On the other hand, there are items they really do not want to keep and use any more. The feelings of guilt are however less troubling if the clothes and textiles on a household level have been circulating in several steps before they are sorted. Donating textiles to charity organizations helps to reduce the feeling of guilty conscience. When choosing this alternative, the decisions of the future fate of the textiles are carried forward to the receiving organization. The informants mention different kind of organizations that they benefit with donations. Trust is an important factor when they choose which one to give to. The preferred ones have to fulfill their promises to help people in need. By donating textiles the informants think they have contributed to the circulation process, and they are satisfied by the thought that someone else will reuse the sorted textiles.

## **What to Save**

One aspect of the sorting process is what people are saving. When analyzing the informants stories on this matter, some categories connected to clothing appears:

1. Small children's clothing (the first and smallest ones)
2. Handmade clothes, especially those made by the informants or older relatives, mainly mothers and grandmothers

3. Clothes used for certain occasions or representing different styles such as the wedding dress or the mini dress from the late 1960s
4. Expensive formal wear such as evening dresses and tailcoats
5. Clothes connected to their former user, no longer alive, such as “dad’s worn out sweater” or “mum’s night linen”
6. Textiles that could be reused for creative purposes, such as clothes made of beautiful fabric

When explaining why they are saving this kind of clothing, the informants mention words such as memory, nostalgia, security and sentimentality. Many of them believe that things like textiles help us to remember various events and eras in life. Dear persons are associated with the clothes they have worn; their fragrance can remain, just as the patching’s and repairs they ones made. To put the clothes on, like another skin, is to come closer to the loved ones and to remember them. Experiences connected to the senses are important, how the clothes feel, how they smell and look, and how they sound when moving. The reusing practices are, in this case, about a desire to remember people, occasions or one’s own life history.

Apart from people’s desire to remember, other aspects connected to ideological considerations and economic conditions can be seen in the informant’s stories. One informant says (s)he saves a lot of things, not only textiles, building up resource depots for future use. This way of living is a very conscious decision based on an individual political ideology and desire to care for the planet and its limited resources. Saving and reusing things is for this informant a way of practicing her/his ideological point of view.

Buttons, zippers, embroideries and large pieces of fabric are examples of resources kept by many in order to use them for making new clothes or patching old ones. Before getting rid of discarded textiles, they are examined by their owners to see if parts and details could be saved. Sometimes altering is a possibility in order to be able to use the actual clothing a bit longer. A common practice among elderly informants is for example to turn worn out collars and cuffs on shirts and blouses. When telling about these practices, they also bear witness of previous economic conditions forcing people not to waste anything that could be useful. As one informant put it: “You did not throw away clothes that were useful when I was a child. You patched and repaired, or you may be made something else from them.” (Questionnaire 239: 613). The idea of reusing textiles is for this generation connected with these specific skills and practices in altering, patching and mending. It is also connected with an economical practice, which is based on the ability to avoid costs in the household by making material objects (including food) last as long as possible.

## **At the Flea Market**

The flea market in focus for the study is located in a medium-sized community in southern Sweden and it is run by a non-profit organization that is politically and religiously independent. When the fieldwork was conducted in 2009 there were not many competitors to the business, and many of the residents living in the central parts of the community frequently made donations of things they had sorted out from their homes. Since 2009 the second hand market has come into fashion, and more organizations have started up new businesses in the community. The location of the flea market is in a building previously used for small-scale industrial purposes. It is an example of the fact that sales of used goods earlier took place in the outskirts of a town, near industries, dumps and railway stations (Straw 2010: 211). In the last decade, however, the central part of the city has expanded and apartment blocks have been built near to the flea market. Instead of being located outside the town, it has become a part of and incorporated into the urban city. As there has been a general increasing interest in the second hand market, one can notice a geographical movement connected with how the large charity organizations relocate their thrift shops and second hand stores to more central parts of the urban city (*ibid.*: 211).

People who want to make donations to the flea market can leave the things in a special room near to one of the entrances. The first sorting process starts in this room when the donations are taken care of. Most of the donated things are textiles, and at least one person handles all the textiles and sorts them before they enter into further sorting processes in the flea market. The sorting opportunities are many; the volunteers working here want to take care of everything, even the textiles that cannot be sold. They make an effort to avoid throwing textiles away. Instead they cooperate with other organizations that work with charity and aid. Possibilities for future reuse, which the volunteers have to know when sorting, include net curtains becoming malaria mosquito nets in Africa, sheets and towels donated to homeless people, whole pieces of fabric and threads donated to a municipality's sewing activity for unemployed, and finally dirty and really torn fabrics are thrown away.

Another possibility is to select textiles that are to be donated people in need in Belarus. Transparent plastic sacks are used to contain the textiles that a few times a year are being transported to a religious organization located in the city of Borås, about 150 km away. This organization sorts through the textiles once again, before transporting them to Belarus. In the plastic sacks go warm jackets, blankets, children's clothes and a lot of clothes in dark colors like grey, black, brown and green. The choice of what to put in these sacks follows each volunteer's idea of what people in Belarus need, based on presumed aesthetical preferences, and on the climate.

The sorting process described continues in the textile department located in a room containing shelves and a large table. On one side of the table, home textiles are taken care of, and on the other side clothing. Every textile item is inspected before decisions are made regarding what will happen to them, and as a consequence, where they are going to be placed. As mentioned earlier, it has been estimated that 10 % of the donations of clothing and textiles can be sold. Therefore an important aim when sorting is to identify possible commodities, textiles that the customers will be interested in purchasing. Many of the volunteers have a long experience working on the flea market and “know” who the regular customers are and what they desire. Regular customers sometimes ask them to look for certain things, such as hand woven linen clothes or tailcoats. Textiles that are to be sold get a price tag. When purchased, the volunteers who are working in the shop cut off the tags, and put them in boxes for later reuse.

### **Material and Cultural Wear and Tear - Discussion**

Even though the two studies were conducted separately of one another, and do not refer to the same individuals or even geographic regions, the similarities and differences between the results can be used to highlight some significant dimensions of the sentiments evoked by textiles. A general result is that, on the one hand, there seems to be a change over time when it comes to motives for handling textiles with care and not simply throwing them in the bin. Until the early 1970s the skills of mending, altering and patching was common knowledge, to women at least, and these skills were even taught girls in schools in Sweden. Prior to contemporary consumer society, fabrics were expensive and well worth taking good care of. The same can be said of other commodities (and food leftovers) that were taken care of, altered and reused within a common household practice guided by the idea of avoiding costs. The economic situation in most of the households required people not to waste anything that could be useful. The reusing processes were thus mainly about wear and tear considerations from a material point of view.

Today, on the other hand, previous household skills are not common knowledge anymore and expanding wardrobes and cupboards is a consequence of the contemporary increasing textile production, and consumption. There are many more clothing and home textiles items in circulation, which have to be taken care of. This means people in their everyday life have more textiles to manage and to sort. According to the informants, handling and sorting textiles is partly about coping with different feelings connected with guilt and bad conscience. From a moral and ethical point of view it seems to be easier for people to dispose of worn out textiles, especially if they have been worn near the body, such as socks, T-shirts, scarves and underwear. But even if worn out, many informants say they are trying to make the textiles circulate in different ways. Clothes can for example be

downgraded and end up as working clothes (cf Hetherington 2004; Norris 2012). Buttons and zippers can be saved for future altering practices, and pieces of fabrics can turn to cloths used for different purposes. Textiles no longer in use can be donated to non-profit organizations that are considered to be trustworthy.

The volunteers on the flea market have the same approach towards the donated textiles as the informants have towards their private items; they are to be circulated and reused and not to be thrown away. The sorting processes on the flea market are organized in such a way that most of the items are taken care of and will be reused. Since only 10 % are sold, 90 % have to be handled in another way. The options are many, and every textile object has to be examined in at least two processes before their future fate is decided. Collaborations with other organizations are necessary in order to get the textiles into further circulation, to people in need in Sweden, various African countries and in Belarus, for instance. The informants as well as the volunteers are involved in processes of cultural, rather than material wear and tear. If a textile is culturally worn out, in good condition but in some way or another impossible to use, it is from a moral and ethical point of view difficult to dispose of it. Instead informants as well as volunteers on the flea market are trying to make the textile object to circulate. In that way it can be useful for others.

To conclude, reusing practices connected to textiles have changed since the 1950s. For informants in the study who had experienced and were raised during a previous era, the idea of reusing textiles by altering, patching and mending continue to be important. In comparison, younger generations seem more interested in the idea of creating a sustainable society by reusing objects and recycling material. For them, the second hand market is an opportunity to contribute to this by making clothing and home textiles circulate, instead of buying new ones.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Examples of Swedish organizations working in this field are the Salvation Army, Stadsmissionen, Erikshjälpen, Emmaus and The Red Cross.

<sup>2</sup> The article is based on a research project titled *Reusing Textiles: on Material and Cultural Tear* (Palmsköld 2013).

<sup>3</sup> The questions asked in the project were:

What happens to the clothing and home textiles that by owners and users are considered unusable and ready to be sorted out?

What is the everyday practice when you sort, discard, reuse, give away, sell, trade or donate textiles to charity?

Why do many feel reluctance to throw away clothing and household linen into the trash bin?

<sup>4</sup> The method is used by other Swedish Ethnology based archives, such as DAG in Gothenburg, DAUM in Umeå, ULMA in Uppsala and LUF in Lund.

<sup>5</sup> Two of the informants were born in the 1970s, 3 in the 1960s, 11 in the 1950s, 34 in the 1940s, 21 in the 1930s, 13 in the 1920s and 3 in the 1920s (Palmsköld 2013:55).

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