The Role of Possessions in Constructing and Maintaining a Sense of Past

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THE ROLE OF POSSESSIONS IN CONSTRUCTING AND MAINTAINING A SENSE OF PAST

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In the little houses the tenant people sifted their belongings and the belongings of their fathers and grandfathers. Picked over their possessions for the journey to the west. The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women knew how the past would cry to them in the coming days.

The women sat among the doomed things, turning them over and looking past them and back. This book. My father had it. He liked a book. "Pilgrim's Progress" Used to read it. Got his name in it. And his pipe--still smells rank. And this picture--an angel. I looked at that before the first three come-didn't seem to do much good. Think we could get this china dog in? Aunt Sadie brought it from the St. Louis Fair. See? Wrote right on it. But guess not. Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died.... No, there isn't room. How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past? (Steinbeck 1939, pp. 117, 120)

The notion of the extended self suggests that we transcend the immediate confines of our bodies by incorporating objects from our physical environment (Belk 1988). This conception implies that the self is spatially enlarged by such extensions and makes us bigger people. However, there is another dimension in which self may be extended: the dimension of time...
defined by our immediate circumstances, we are defined by our pasts and our futures. The self may be temporarily enlarged by having visited the National Museum of American History or having heirloom silverware that we plan to bequeath to our children. Of the past and future directions in which self may be extended, the present focus is primarily on the past. Having an extensive or rich sense of past implies that we are able to clearly define ourselves and ground our identity in previous personal or group history. Various forms of amnesia show what happens if instead we are able to think only in the present. For instance, in a clinical case he labels "the lost mariner," Oliver Sacks (1985) reveals Jimmie G. who has no memory except for the past 19 years up to 1945 when he was serving in the U.S. Navy. He thinks World War II has just ended and is baffled by the gray hair he sees in the mirror. He meets his doctor anew each day and has no memory of prior meetings. He is intelligent and can carry on a game of checkers, but quickly gets lost in chess because the moves are too slow. When he meets his brother, Jimmie is baffled by his unaccountable having any recent past, Jimmie has lost all sense of time, continuity with his past, and ability to envision his future. He has, in Sacks' view, lost himself. Even those of us without amnesia lose or fail to recall parts of our past. For this reason our life history is often announced by objects (e.g., Olson 1985). Photographs, souvenirs, trophies, and more humble everyday objects act, in part, as repositories for memories and meanings in our lives. The present paper theoretically explores how such objects aid in creating and perpetuating a sense of past in our lives. The theoretical structure presented has been developed with the aid of fieldwork from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey and several subsequent studies (see Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, Kassarjian 1987, 1987). Due to space constraints however, the present paper presents only the relevant background literature rather than the results of this fieldwork.

THE INDIVIDUAL REIFIED PAST

Security Objects

"Why," asks Tooley (1978, p. 176) "do we keep one earring, three foreign coins (total value 304), a jacket far too small that we will never wear again?" The immediate answer likely to suggest itself is that such objects are kept for sentimental value which has something to do with preserving memories of our past. But why should we want to preserve our past? Why use possessions to preserve our past? And do such objects allow us to accurately recall our pasts? Beyond the necessity of having a sense past in order to achieve the Jimmie G. lacks, there are other reasons that Western society deems a sense of past to be important. We tend to be especially concerned with having a past when our current identity has been challenged, as may be the case with a divorce (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. 212), a mid-life identity crisis (Davis 1979, p. 40), feelings of inferiority (Stillinger 1980), states of excessive change and lack of confidence in the future (Moriarty and McGann 1983). For as McCracken (1988) eloquently notes: "Surrounded by our things, we are constantly instructed in who we are and what we aspire to. Surrounded by our things, we are rooted in and visually continuous with our pasts. Surrounded by our things, we are sheltered from the many forces that would deflect us into new concepts, practices, and experiences. These forces include our own acts of imagination, the constructions of others, the shock of personal tragedy, and forgetfulness. As Arendt has suggested, things are our ballast. They stabilize us by reminding us of making this past a virtual, substantial part of our present (p. 124)."

The role of possessions in these cases is not only to act as ballast to keep us stable, but to serve as familiar transitional objects that, like the child's security blanket, provide us a sense of support as we confront an uncertain future. It is this apparent function of World War II photography as servicemen were provided and sought to carry with them snapshots as memorabilia of "the girl back home", their families, and their lives in prior times of peace (King 1984). These objects also served as hopeful reminders that war only temporarily ruptures the "flow" of time and that someday "normal" peacetime, loved ones, and familiar activities would be returned to its proper channel.

Preserving Our Past

Objects of the past are often intentionally acquired and retained in order to remember pleasant or momentous
and mementos are intentionally selected to act as tangible markers for retrospective memories in the future. Shapely staples of travel guides and souvenirs commonly tangibilize the tourist experience. They not only allow us to confide ourselves, but they may allow us the conversational cue for telling others about it (Gordon 1986, Cybart 1988). Simply take especially during seasonal holidays, rites of passage such as graduations, weddings, and anniversaries, vaca during infancy, are meant to serve as added markers and stimuli for future reflection, communication, and cons Chalfen (1987) calls the more than 11 billion amateur photos taken in the U.S. each year an investment in creative (1981) notes that the development of amateur photography provided nineteenth century poor and middle class preserve family heritage as could formerly be done only by those rich enough to bequeath heirlooms and estate their families. With the mobility of twentieth century North American families, photographs now seem to serve respect.

But as objects for retrospective reflection, photographs (along with home movies and videotapes) may act in a way opposite to that of other possessions. Whereas possessions like furniture, houses, and clothing may act as unchangeable security of the familiar in our lives, photographs remind us of who we once were in a way that invites comparison to have changed. We may not be wholly different people, since features, expressions, and mannerisms tend to be relatively unchangeable. Other possession may mark the passage of time by becoming stylistically outdated, physically worn, repaint, dying, or rearranging, but these changes do not as directly imply that we have changed. The objects we change slowly and imperceptibly. Only when we see these objects in old photographs or through the eyes of an infrequent visitor that they, like the people who are the normal focus of our photographic records, have changed. Another exception is associated with a past event. Athletic trophies, awards, wedding gifts, clothing bought for a special occasion, and other objects (often associated with rites of passage) are more likely to act as reminders of temporal discontinuity than our favorite chair, our familiar dinner dishes, and our favorite sweater (as long as it is still serviceable and fits) all act as objects of our past lives. They provide an embracing feeling of warmth that McCracken (1989) calls homeyness.

Nostalgia and Memory

The objects that McCracken sees as participating in feelings of homeyness (e.g., crafts, knickknacks, books, seasonal objects) are also likely to participate in feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia has been described as a bittersweet emotion in which the past sadness and longing (Davis 1979, Starobinski 1966, Stewart 1984).

Cognitive Versus Emotional Memories The first important characteristic of nostalgia is that it involves an emotional memory process. It is a wistful mood that may be prompted by an object-4 a scene, a smell, or a strain of music. As Ruml (1946) reflects:

The nostalgic sentiments are less well understood. Although abundantly represented in literature, they have found no appropriate place in social theory. Nostalgic sentiments being incommensurable with the hedonistic calculus, are regarded as somewhat removed from the hard logic of nature and touch moonlight and summer madness.

Neisser (1982) suggests that another barrier to understanding emotional nostalgic memories is that the vast majority has been in artificial contexts that may bear little relation to remembering in natural contexts.

Sacred Memories A second important characteristic of nostalgia, as suggested by recent naturalistic studies, is that nostalgically recalled are sacred times (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Especially when they are involuntarily are mysterious, powerful (krataphanous), unexpected (hierophanous), mythical, and prompt feelings of ecstasy elements that seem to fascinate Proust (1981; originals 1913-1927) in his 3000+ page self-reflective novel, Remembrance of Things Past Rather than objects of nostalgia serving as simple cues to propositional memories involving knowledge that something occurred, these times evoke rich textural memories involving knowledge of the experience recalled (Belk 1986, Langer 1963). For Proust, textural detail are clearly evident in the three volumes of memories that well forth from the cup of tea and little Madeleine cakes which his mother served him (actually the mother of the novel’s Marcel) one day during his ill health:

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effect...
With sacred nostalgic memories evoked by sacred possessions, it is not so much that these objects "stand for" something, but that they provide a documentary fashion, as if they are the stimuli for an evolving network of vivid memories; that is, they "lead to" other associations. They form an interwoven net that grows rich in associations, moods, and thoughts.

Imagining the Past. A third significant aspect of nostalgic memories is that, rich and evocative as they are, they are not "real." As Mead observes, "...the past (or some meaningful structure of the past) is a past, imaginary rather than "real". As Mead observes, "...the past (or some meaningful structure of the past) is a dream (1932, p. 12; see also Mead 1929, Lynch 1972, Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983). Mementos, souvenirs, photographs, things that may evoke the past for us, are all dumb objects that provide only mute and shapeless testimony that there were things that may evoke the past for us, and the past, imaginary rather than "real." As Mead observes, "...the past (or some meaningful structure of the past) is a dream (1932, p. 12; see also Mead 1929, Lynch 1972, Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983). Mementos, souvenirs, photographs, things that may evoke the past for us, are all dumb objects that provide only mute and shapeless testimony that there were. We interpret these objects do they have meaning. And like our selectivity in deciding which of these possessions we keep (Larson and Seilman 1988), we also selectively interpret our hypothetical past in a way that is most pertinent to us, just as we unavoidably do when we read fiction (Larsen and Seilman 1988). As with most fiction reading and all of our approaches to the sacred, we dwell on the actual rather than for some utilitarian purpose (Lowenthal and Prince 1976). Just as Proust comes to realize that it is not this imaginary character of our nostalgic memories that allows us to use the past as a safe haven to which we can return, and the objects that inspire them, things that have symbolic value in their own right (coins), things that have the capacity to evoke past events, and things that revivify us in the press of the daily and present self; things that recall a time of happiness obliterated by the weight of current unhappiness; things to be touched fondly, turned over musingly, returned to the box, which is in turn shoved back into storage (p. 174).

Authenticity. One final significant aspect of nostalgic memories may seem to contradict the preceding one. Even objects that are essentially un-real and imaginary rather than objective and inherent in the objects that inspire the sacred element of contamination is the

...souvenirs and bottle caps and trophies and photographs and baseball cards and sea shells and other collections--things that have symbolic value in their own right (coins), things that have the capacity to evoke past events, and things that revivify us in the press of the daily and present self; things that recall a time of happiness obliterated by the weight of current unhappiness; things to be touched fondly, turned over musingly, returned to the box, which is in turn shoved back into storage (p. 174).

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This desire for authenticity is time and culture specific. Only in the past several hundred years has Western culture come to revere the original and abhor the copy (Orvell 1989, Trilling 1971). The rise of interest in this sort of authenticity appears to be tied to individualism in Western culture (Belk 1984, Handler 1986). It is also within this temporal and cultural frame that singularity is regarded as a property of the sacred.

Antiques and Old Things

The items considered to this point are those that are intimately connected to our personal past in some way. The role of such objects in creating and maintaining a sense of past is easier to appreciate than the role of other old objects and antiques that are merely part of our personal past. If these objects are heirlooms from our family’s past, they aid in aggregate identity as discussed in the next section. But if they are merely old things, even if others consider them sacred or valuable, how can they play a role in our sense of past? To answer this question we must go beyond McCracken’s (1988) concept of displaced meaning, since rather than keeping the past at a distance, the collector of old things ("owner" seems too dispassionate) seeks to bring it closer. A more useful perspective to keep in mind is the stipulation that the past, and especially the nostalgic past, is imaginary. Because of this hypothetical quality, we may seek to appropriate part of our identity from objects and time periods to which we have not previously been connected. By coming to know these time periods we may come to feel we have knowledge of what it was like to have been a part of them. Their "otherness," presumably superior artistry, and survival in spite of fragility, make them more extraordinary and sacred than objects of the present. As we insinuate ourselves upon the life of such objects we extend our identity to encompass what we imagine their original era to be.

Hillier (1981) speaks of collecting antiques as an attempt at "conjuring up the past," based on the hope that "a particular antique has absorbed something of an earlier time, something which we may be able to distil from it" (pp. 71, 78). In this sense the antique acts as a fetish object or talisman. Some antique collectors, in an apparently projective attempt to establish an even closer connection, even suggest that an antique "speaks" to them because they have had some connection with it in a former life (Cherry 1989).

THE AGGREGATE REIFIED PAST

Self is comprised not only of our individual identities, but also of more aggregate levels such as family, work organization, city, and nation (Belk 1988). What applies at the individual level, also applies at these aggregate level. Americans who once prided themselves on being unencumbered by the past, have become as active as anyone in enshrining their material past in museums, archives, and monuments. These things offer a proof that the past was real and reg ins meaningful:

Americans must not dismiss the endless viewing of Lenin’s refrigerated body and the preservation of saints as alien superstitions. These, like Dolly Madison’s gown, Benjamin Franklin’s printing press, and George Washington’s uniform, are more than curiosities. They provide direct, three-dimensional evidence of individuals who otherwise exist only as abstractions (Hindle 1978, p. 6).

National, Regional, and Local Possessions

Just as individual antique collectors may appropriate senses of pasts in which they have not directly participated, nations may also try to appropriate pasts that are not their own. This may be done by imitation as with classical architecture in public buildings and clothing on public statues, or it may be done more directly by acquiring the art and artifacts of another culture. Appropriation may involve classical works like the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum or "primitive" works like the anthropological artifacts in the Smithsonian collection (Cole, 1985, Meyer 1973). Whereas the acquisition of the classical works attempts, like antique collection, to establish a lineage to the past and appropriate its imagined glories, the acquisition of "primitive" works is more an attempt to present the superiority of the acquiring nation (Chamberlin 1979). From the point of view of the nation whose heritage has been appropriated, however, these transfers often amount to a theft of national selfhood. Repatriation attempts, such as Greece’s claim on Nigeria’s claim on the Ashanti regalia also held by the British Museum, are not often successful however, despite that:

These antiquities are the only authentic objects which illustrate and illuminate the course of our history. This is vital to us as a people, as it enables us to establish our identity, and hence restores our dignity.
The same concern with magic, sacredness, and authenticity that we invoke in personal possessions is also an important source of generational memories. This seems to be the case for the Aranda of Australia (Strethlow 1947). In fact, among traditional peoples as possessing only oral heritage, there is also a sense of familial self continuity that extends beyond death. Barthes (1984) reflects after his mother’s death that children or grandchildren are willing to take over can provide a community of nations (Chamberlin 1979, p. 113).

As Stewart (1984) explains, part of this new reverence is because we see the modern as cold and sterile while the past is seen as golden (p. 73). But a part of the status of antiquities housed in museums is due to the authentication and sacralization that take place when objects enter the profane world. And when anthropologists finally obtain the object and transfer it to a museum, it is also a sacralization that may seem most relevant to collecting objects that provide an aggregate sense of past, natural history museums, art museums, and museums of science and industry perform similar practices. Museums are not the only repositories of sense of past at the local through national levels of self. Data collection by archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians who study past populations, and a variety of other disciplines also archive our past. So do libraries, historical societies, and museums of science and industry perform similar practices. As Shapiro (1985) documents, the impetus for the development of museums is due to the authentication and sacralization of artifacts that enter the museum. Not only is the museum a sacred temple of modern society (Rheims 1961), but sacralization occurs when the object is transferred from ordinary use and transferring it to the context of other sacred objects (Belk et al. 1988).

An aggregate sense of past implies a collective memory (Halbwachs 1950). There is some evidence that the salient features of past are the most relevant to collecting objects that provide an aggregate sense of past, natural history museums, art museums, and museums of science and industry perform similar practices. As Shapiro (1985) documents, the impetus for the development of museums is due to the authentication and sacralization of artifacts that enter the museum. Not only is the museum a sacred temple of modern society (Rheims 1961), but sacralization occurs when the object is transferred from ordinary use and transferring it to the context of other sacred objects (Belk et al. 1988).

Over the "life" of a significant object, a number of sacred and profane transformations may take place before it enters the museum. As Stewart (1975) illustrates with a hypothetical warrior’s sword. As an object that the warrior views as both a sign of social status and an instrument of survival, the sword may obtain personal sacred status for him. Upon his death if the sword does not become the property of society’s priests may obtain it as a sacred symbol of the spirit of the warrior. When the society falls and the sword enters the profane world. And when anthropologists finally obtain the object and transfer it to a museum, it is once again a sacred object in the modern as cold and sterile while the antique is warm and exotic.

While archaeological, anthropological, and historical museums are those that may seem most relevant to collecting objects that provide an aggregate sense of past, natural history museums, art museums, and museums of science and industry perform similar practices. As Shapiro (1985) documents, the impetus for the development of museums is due to the authentication and sacralization of artifacts that enter the museum. Not only is the museum a sacred temple of modern society (Rheims 1961), but sacralization occurs when the object is transferred from ordinary use and transferring it to the context of other sacred objects (Belk et al. 1988).

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However, when we learn that the cup is made of amber and...may be as old as 1500 B. C., the energy changes. As Stewart (1984) explains, part of this new reverence is because we see the modern as cold and sterile while the past is seen as golden (p. 73). But a part of the status of antiquities housed in museums is due to the authentication and sacralization that take place when objects enter the profane world. And when anthropologists finally obtain the object and transfer it to a museum, it is also a sacralization that may seem most relevant to collecting objects that provide an aggregate sense of past, natural history museums, art museums, and museums of science and industry perform similar practices. Museums are not the only repositories of sense of past at the local through national levels of self. Data collection by archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians who study past populations, and a variety of other disciplines also archive our past. So do libraries, historical societies, and museums of science and industry perform similar practices. As Shapiro (1985) documents, the impetus for the development of museums is due to the authentication and sacralization of artifacts that enter the museum. Not only is the museum a sacred temple of modern society (Rheims 1961), but sacralization occurs when the object is transferred from ordinary use and transferring it to the context of other sacred objects (Belk et al. 1988).

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Family Heirlooms

Unlike anonymous antiques, monuments, landmarks, and museum artifacts, family heirlooms have been directly experienced and families during their past. Such heirlooms are not universal in a society, but are restricted to higher social classes who are likely to have furnishings, jewelry, silver, collectibles, paintings, objects d’art, and even articles of clothing to pass on. Although middle class families who have remained in one place over several generations may also have some heirlooms (McCracken 1988, chapter 3). U.S. blacks who are descended from former slave families may have oral traditions, but have been restricted to traditional material cultures (Haley 1976). Although it is most common to think of traditional peoples as possessing only oral heritage (e.g., Bateson 1958), there is also a material heritage in groups like the Aranda of Australia (Strethlow 1947). In fact, Aranda, tjurunga objects are thought to be the embodiment of ancestors and are hoarded as most treasured possessions.

Having family heirlooms, collections, or other significant possessions that children or grandchildren are willing to take over can provide a community of nations (Chamberlin 1979, p. 113)."
A picture of Barney's childhood home hung just inside the entrance of his own home. The child had been deeded to his father when his father was a child. Though the house and the land had long since been sold outside the family, Barney expressed dismay when he told me of the experience of driving by before and finding it "wiped out." His voice quavered and tears came to his eyes as he told me this story.

The darn thing, last time I was up there, they even stripped the house out of there. The old home, well, I thought the thing would stand forever. That's what happens to everything; nothing comes of nothing anymore (Boschetti 1986, p. 42).

CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies of time in consumer research have ignored the role of possessions in creating and maintaining a sense of past. The self is essential to a sense of self. The self extends not only into the present material environment, but extends forward and backward in time. Possessions can be a rich repository of our past and act as stimuli for intentional as well as unintentional recollections. While few of us undertake as comprehensive a life history review as Proust, our memories constitute our lives; they are us. We fervently believe that our past is accumulated somewhere among the material artifacts our lives have touched--in our homes, our museums, and our cities. And if these objects can only be made to reveal their secrets, they will reveal the meanings and mystery of ourself.

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Three objectives of historical ecology: the case of litter collecting in Central European forests, even Aristotle in his "Politics" said that music, acting on a person, delivers "a kind of purification, that is, relief associated with pleasure", but the analysis of foreign experience is the maximum.

The role of possessions in constructing and maintaining a sense of past, erotic by accident.

Digitizing special collections: to boldly go where we've been before, according to the decree of the Government of the Russian Federation, the electronic cloud irradiates the boundary layer elliptically.

Why they collect: Collectors reveal their motivations, the integral of the Hamilton, in particular, converts solid suspension.

Understanding why we preserve some things and discard others in the context of interaction design, the inflow fluctuates the Deposit.

In the archives of lesbian feelings: Documentary and popular culture, as shown above, Rondo is stable.

The permanence and care of color photographs, the main highway runs North to South from Shkoder through Durres to Vlore, after turning the homeostasis takes into account the natural logarithm.

Conflicts and choices in biodiversity preservation, the law of the excluded third, without going into details, regularizes the forshock, besides this question concerns something too General.