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Russell W. Belk, University of Utah

[ to cite ]:

http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/7083/volumes/v17/NA-17

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Advances in Consumer Research Volume 17, 1990 Pages 669-676

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

Russell W. Belk, University of Utah

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 came--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 the bottom. Looks like.... 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; that our possessions make 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 temporally 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 about ourselves 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 39 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 integral sense that 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 1969), 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 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 our past, by 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 World War II photography as servicemen were provided and sought to carry with them snapshots as memorabilia of their families, and their lives in prior times of peace (King 1984). These objects also served as hopeful reminders of 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. Shopping suggestions are now a staple 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). Since taken especially during seasonal holidays, rites of passage such as graduations, weddings, and anniversaries, vacation during infancy, are meant to serve as edited 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 creativity (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 unchanged security of the familiar in our lives, photographs remind us of who we once were in a way that invites comparison have changed. We may not be wholly different people, since features, expressions, and mannerisms tend to be re- undeniable. Other possessions may mark the passage of time by becoming stylistically outdated, physically worn repainting, 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 individual that they, like the people who are the normal focus of our photographic records, have changed. Another exception 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 of our 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 also likely to participate in feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia has been described as a bittersweet emotion in which 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.

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 hedonistic calculus, are regarded as somewhat removed from the hard logic of nature and touch moonlight and summer madness (p. 8).

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 (kratophanous), unexpected (hierophanous), mythical, and prompt feelings of ecstasy elements that seem to fascinate Proust (1981; originals 19131927) 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 or other such time-marked memories involving knowledge of the experience recalled (Belk 1986, Langer 1963). For Proust, these textural detail are clearly evident in the three volumes of memories that well forth from the cup of tea and little I 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 effecti
With sacred nostalgic memories evoked by sacred possessions, it is not so much that these objects "stand for" something else, but they manifest themselves to us and create epiphany (hierophany), it is able to suspend our perception of the everyday world (transcendence). However, the additional sacred element most useful for understanding why we insist upon authentic objects from our past. Because the sacred contaminates only the objects that were present during its occurrence, inauthentic, faked, or forged objects lack sacred power to carry our memories. A similar wedding ring, a photograph of a similar family's Thanksgiving feast, or a car that is like the one we had; these objects do they have meaning. And like our selectivity in deciding which of these possessions we use the past as a safe haven to which we may displace our hopes and happiness obliterated by the weight of current unhappiness; things to be touched fondly, stimulating pleasant memories, and things that have symbolic value in their own right (coins), things that have the capacity to reinforce a treasured mythology of the self, things that evoke the past for us, are all dumb objects that provide only mute and shapeless testimony that there was a past. Only when we interpret these objects do they have meaning. And like our selectivity in deciding which of these possessions we return to the box, which is in turn shoved back into storage (p. 174).
This desire for authenticity is time and culture specific. Only in the past several hundred years has Western culture valued the original and abhorred the copy (Orvell 1989, Trilling 1971). The rise of interest in this sort of authenticity appears to be related 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 may only be 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, antiques act 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 levels. 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 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 assert 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 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 country. 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 imp
mum source of generational memories. This seems to
account for the different musical preferences of different generations (Holbrook
et al. 1988).

An aggregate sense of past implies a collective memory (Halbwachs 1950). There is some evidence that the salien
generation (Schuw and Scott 1989). The period of late adolescence and early adulthood when adult identity is a
prominent source of generational memories. This seems to account for the different musical preferences of diff
and Schindler 1989) and the different eras of collectibles preferred by those who have reached midlife (Davis 1979;
generation-specific.

Family Heirlooms

Unlike anonymous antiques, monuments, landmarks, and museum artifacts, family heirlooms have been dis
ded and families during their past. Such heirlooms are not universal in a society, but are restricted to higher social cl
likely to have furnishings, jewelry, silver, collectibles, paintings, objects d’art, and even articles of clothing to pass
50), although middle class families who have remained in one place over several generations may also have so
88, chapter 3). U.S. blacks who are descended from former slave families may have oral traditions, but have been
tuguna objects are thought to be the embodiment of ancestors and are hoarded as most treasured pos

Having family heirlooms, collections, or other significant possessions that children or grandchildren are willing t
sense of familial self continuity that extends beyond death. Barthes (1984) reflects after his mother’s death that h
powder box, a cut-crystal flagon, a low chair, raffia panels, and the large bags she loved. Even when families do not succeed generations, the continued existence of childhood home and other important objects may provide a immortality. When these objects are instead destroyed, we lose a part of our past, a part of our selves:

A picture of Barney’s childhood home hung just inside the entrance of his own home. The childhood home 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 that the darn thing, last time I was up there, they even stripped the house out of there. The old home, thought the thing would stand forever. That's what happens to everything; nothing comes of not (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 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 that if these objects can only be made to reveal their secrets, they will reveal the meanings and mystery of ourself

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