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As the population of developed countries age, we witness some processes and phenomena that shed new light on the ageing consumer, consumer identity work, and intergenerational transmission of cherished possessions. During the last half of the century individuals in more developed countries have, in historical terms, enjoyed unprecedented wealth. With new found affluence the inevitable question of what to do with all of these possessions when one reaches life’s twilight becomes newly prominent.

We stumbled on the ubiquity of the disposition dilemma among older populations when informants spontaneously raised the issue of their struggle with deciding what to do with their cherished possessions. Since the publication of our earlier research (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000), interest in this phenomena in the popular press as well as in academic venues, has grown. In this chapter we explore the precipitating life events, emotions, and strategies associated with older consumers’ transmission of their special possessions. Our research helps distinguish possessions singled out by consumers as being “cherished” and/or “priceless.” Perhaps more than other possessions, it is the meanings for family identity (Epp and Price 2008) these items hold that have made them special to their caretakers, and not their potential exchange value. Thus, our interpretation focuses on the meanings of these special possessions.

Earlier literature examined involuntary disposition of cherished possessions, precipitated by passively experienced events, such as a debilitating illness, or a move to a nursing home, but little consumer research has tapped the theoretical insights to be gained from a focus on the voluntary disposition of cherished possessions.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION IN FAMILIES
The meanings of family and kinship in late modern consumer culture are dynamic, fashioned and refashioned to suit changing circumstances (Löfgren 1984; Smart and Neale 1999; Stacey 1990; Yanagisako 1984). An accelerated tendency for people to construct their families out of diverse households and sets of relationships developing at different times and in disparate contexts is shown by the sharp rise in the number of blended family households in the US (Bumpass, Raley and Sweet 1995; Morgan 1996, Smart and Neale 1999).

Kin relationships remain important, negotiated between members over time and changing circumstances, and embedded in the personal biographies of the people concerned (Finch and Mason 1993, 2000). Contemporary consumers still express adherence to a familial kin group and to feel they contribute actively to it (Gutierrez, Price and Arnould 2008; Smart and Neale 1999; Miller 1998). In consumer societies where individuals construct their lives without many fixed points, close relationships remain central to identity and well-being (Arnould and Price 2000; Finch and Mason 2000; Gergen 2000). Relational family practices-- rites of passage, reunions, dinners, family dramas, and calendrical rituals for instance-- are enduring, affectively charged sources of self-identity, recorded in our newspapers, and expressed in personal narrative (Cheal 1988; Epp and Price 2008; Morgan 1996, Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997; McGlone et al. 1998; Neville 1984; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Yu, Burns and Veeck 2006).

The elective quality of identity and family and the continuing importance of family practices lead us to speculate about links between family practices and inherited possessions. Family has long been recognized as crucial to the reproduction of social systems. Transmission of domestic property in particular expresses and symbolizes the boundaries of kinship groups and power within those boundaries (Douglass 1984; Finch and Mason 2000, Goody 1976, Judge and Hrdy 1992; Laslett and Wall 1972; Rosenfeld 1979; Marcus and Hall 1992).
Finch and Mason’s (2000, p.161) interviewees seemed more engaged emotionally with inherited individual keepsakes (often objects of no value) than with material assets. Individuals in families they studied displayed a clear stake in the symbolic significance of these items. And British and American inheritors of cherished possessions and heirlooms claim they are charged with qualities of previous owners (see also Grayson and Shulman 2000; McCracken 1988; Sussman, Cates and Smith 1970; Tobin 1996; Unruh 1983). Such objects also symbolize descendants’ relationships with their deceased kinsfolk. Finally, research indicates inherited objects provide vehicles for animating memories—creating, shaping, and sustaining them (Finch and Mason 2000; Grafton-Small 1993; Katriel and Ferrell 1991).

In sum, research on cherished possessions and heirlooms in late modern families raises the following research questions. Positive contamination of the object through prolonged contact with a respected elder kinsperson helps preserve cherished objects for one generation, but what of subsequent generations? Are inherited emblems of family relationships an important source of family identity, difference, and distinction? Do middle class Americans seek to collect and pass forward their ancestors’ history and achievements? Do individuals act as guardians of special objects for future generations? Do guardians use inherited objects to convey values and meanings of significance to their kin; if so how? Do consumers use heirloom objects as signs of imagined values? May heirloom objects become inalienable (Weiner 1992; Godelier 1999)?

Research Activity

Kinship and social-class provide the sampling frame boundaries for this investigation. Kinship is the predominant pattern of wealth transference in the U.S. (Judge and Hrdy 1992; Schneider 1980; Sussman, Cates and Smith 1970) and the middle class comprises the largest
economic segment of consumers in North America (Kacapyr 1996). Interviews with multiple generations examine whether and how cherished possessions are kept within families across different generations.

In composite, and consistent with the idea that contemporary families have an elective quality, our informant families exhibit numerous divorces, remarriages, deaths, and elements of discord. More than half our informants talked about at least one divorce. Some families live in close geographic proximity, but others live far apart, and most have moved one or more times. Although the majority of our informants currently reside in the Southeastern United States, informants living in Ohio, Illinois, New York, and California were also interviewed. Most of our informants live in urban areas, but a small number live in smaller rural communities. We represent a wide spectrum of white ethnic backgrounds, and include families that have lived in the U.S. for several generations and families that immigrated within the past two generations. A few of our informants are middle-class African American, and a few have Spanish as a first language. We did not explicitly investigate changing prosperity of families across generations, but overall our informant families have experienced upward or stable economic circumstances. That is, to our knowledge we did not interview informants whose families are worse off now than a generation ago.

Research reported here is based upon multiple data sets. It began with semi-structured interviews with 80 older consumers, focusing on their cherished possessions and inherited objects. Depth interviews with 38 informants within 15 family groups, representing 26 intergenerational dyads comprise a second data set. A third set of 70 semi-structured interviews representing 35 intergenerational dyads spread between males and females of three generations supplemented our primary interviews.
Analysis focused on understanding common and contrasting structures in the informants’ emic representations of practices and meanings associated with cherished possessions and of strategies used to keep objects within the family (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Three types of analyses were employed: analyses focused on an informant, between informants within a family, and between informants across our sample of middle-class North Americans (Thompson 1997). Details of data collection, analysis, and discussions of procedures to guarantee credibility and trustworthiness may be found in (Curasi, et al. 2004; Price, et al. 2000).

**FINDINGS**

**Disposition of Special Possessions**

Figure 1 provides a framework of the disposition process organized around five fundamental questions that became pivotal in the disposition process as we examined our data. We wanted to understand 1) the events and/or informant characteristics that triggered the disposition of cherished possessions; 2) the emotions associated with disposition and the relationship of those emotions to disposition decisions; 3) the meanings associated with the special possessions that older consumers decide to transfer; 4) the disposition goals of these informants; and, 5) the tactics consumers employ to accomplish their goals. That is, we were interested in understanding the heuristics that guide the decisions of: who, when, and how to transfer cherished possessions.

Events and/or Informant Characteristics that Trigger Disposition
We found the question of whether older consumers consider what to do with their cherished possessions rests on a complex, idiosyncratic interplay of informants’ sense of their own mortality, of the meanings they associate with their cherished possessions and of their relationship to others, especially family members. Only a handful of our informants claim not to have given much thought to transferring some of their cherished possessions to a loved one. But even these individuals, after prompting, reveal that they have, in fact, given some thought to the future of their possessions, but that they are not yet ready to part with them. The vast majority of our informants, however, display active, agentic thinking about disposition closely linked to creative acts of reminiscence and what gerontologists refer to as “life review” (Butler 1963; 1974).

In late adulthood, life review, including reminiscence often becomes frequent. It is during this life review process that people construct life narratives to help them to answer questions related to the meaning of their life and to assist them in constructing an enduring legacy. Mnemonically rich special possessions are often pivotal in this narrative process focused on explaining the meaning of one’s life and on the possibility of crafting a legacy.

Our informants typically described a confluence of circumstances that collectively precipitate their feelings of the inevitability of their own mortality, motivating them to make these disposition decisions. Mary, who is 77 years old, married, and in good health, illustrates. Her concern has been prompted by her husband’s quadruple heart by-pass surgery, her mother’s death, the death of friends, and reading the obituaries. Regardless of their own age or health status, informants repeatedly discuss a spouse’s illness or death as a crucial precipitating event leading to thoughts about the disposition of their cherished possessions.
Life status changes can also be a precipitating event, leaving older consumers with things they no longer need or use. Especially if these items are meaningful, consumers’ first recourse is to try to give these things to their children. As this woman explains:

I keep telling my children, “If you want something, take it.” They say, “Hold it.” I say, “No.” We are reaching a point that we don’t need all this that we have. We need to get rid of it. And we are. Slowly. …And this one son that lives here in Jacksonville Beach didn’t have dishes, and I told him, I think he ought to take those. And they are very nice. It’s more of a complete set than the ones we have here. …It serves twelve people. And I think to myself, I’d rather have less. We do not entertain that much anymore. So, I am doing that. Every time the children want something or say they like something. (Iris, married, 78)

In other cases, special events such as rites of passage and progressions (marriage, graduation, and twenty-first birthdays) can stimulate gift-giving via transferring a cherished possession. Transferring objects during a life status change can weave the new caretakers’ life story into the meaning and story of a cherished possession, and in this way the meaning of the object may become implicated in multiple identity narratives (Epp and Price 2008).

In sum, we find that there are a number of precipitating events that seem to help initiate or trigger thoughts of disposition of cherished possessions. Prominent in our data are precipitating events that help initiate an awareness of finitude, or a sense of one’s own mortality, coupled with the life review process, which both play a key role in prompting disposition decisions.

Meanings

Informants’ discussions of their cherished possessions illustrate the link also between cherished possessions and meaningful elements of life stories. Consider Julie, for example. She is 76 years old, and has been widowed for about a decade. In addition to the loss of her husband, she has lost several other family members as well. Nevertheless, she is extremely active and not
preparing to die anytime soon. When asked if she had thought about disposing of her special possessions she replies:

The jewelry was bought in Japan when my husband was in the Air Force. He was stationed there for a couple of years in the 1950’s. . . .The jewelry has the strongest feelings for me because my husband is not with me anymore. . . . The jewelry that I gave to my grandmother was something that my husband had given to me before he died. It was very close to me but I really wanted my granddaughter to have it. . . . Of course it will be sad since I know it will not be done until I am close to death. I want the people who are going to receive them to enjoy them, but not really at my expense. I will just leave them to my kids in my will, or they will just know to have them. I think they already know.

The vast majority of our informants discussed at least one possession that served as a narrative mnemonic life token, a totem of identity, or an emblem of kinship structure and family continuity (see Grandpa Louie’s tale below). Among the many meanings of special possessions, the theme comprising narrative mnemonic life tokens is the most salient for our informants. Life stories provide special possessions with meaning and special possessions revitalize older consumers’ life stories. Understanding older consumers’ disposition decisions requires an understanding of these stories (Katriel and Farrell 1991; Korosec-Serfaty 1984). Our informants spontaneously link cherished possessions with life review and use them as a narrative scaffolding to create a personal and resilient sense of identity. With these stories older consumers answer the questions of the meaning of their life and explain their personal legacy. In so doing, they also often craft a type of symbolic immortality for themselves, weaving stories of themselves to their cherished possessions. In turn, they hope their loved ones will remember their stories and retell them long into the future.

Sheila is forthright in expressing her desire for symbolic immortality and in her hope to accomplish it through objects that substitute for her (Godelier 1999; Tobin 1996; Unruh 1983). Although her son is not yet married, Sheila has thought about things he should give his future wife and has thought about his children:
...and I want your children and wife to remember me, and their children, etc. I want to be part of their lives. Someday someone would say, this bracelet came from my Great, Great, Great, Grandmother Sheila (laughing). I guess I’m silly but I am sentimental. I wish I had things from my grandparents, particularly things I could wear like jewelry pieces or rings. That would mean a lot to me.

Cherished possessions of older consumers often mark indexicality (Grayson and Shulman 2000), an indelible contextual association with a specific time, place, and people as with Julie’s Japan-bought jewelry mentioned above. Janice, age 78 also illustrates object indexicality. When asked what possessions she values most she replies,

My jewelry. All of it was given to me from my deceased husband, Richard. I love all of them, but I’m particularly fond of three pieces: the small silver cross, the silver ring, and the Escara bracelet. Each one of them were given to me from Richard throughout the years. I wear the silver cross around my neck, and I got that at age 18 when we were still dating. The silver ring with a small white diamond I received on our engagement at age 20, and that I still wear. The same year that Richard died, he gave me the Escara golden bracelet on no particular occasion. I was 66 at the time. These items are strictly of sentimental value. (Janice, widowed, 78).

As Janice demonstrates, many of our informants discuss their cherished possessions as a record of their life history and indicate indexical value with the term “sentimental,” as distinct from monetary or exchange value. For many informants, mnemonic and narrative qualities of cherished possessions extend their individual and collective sense of self and of the lineage forward through time.

Goals

With a long story accompanying its meaning Virginia in her 80’s, talks about disposing of an urn. She voices her hopes that “sentimental” meanings will preserve it, and frustration that all the urn’s meanings cannot be transferred to her daughter, but the overall goal is transfer of an object bundled with meanings particular to the family:
It’s because of the family feelings. I have a white urn with pastel flowers on it. I remember it because I went with my grandmother to her friend’s house. She would take care of her house when she was gone. Mrs. Norman. She gave it to my grandmother for looking after her house. I remember the walk to the house with my grandmother. She loved flowers and pretty things. She had beautiful things in her house. I remember the walk home with the urn and my grandmother. . . I can picture it in my grandmother’s house, and then in my mother’s house, and now it sits in my house. I hope someday it will be in my daughter’s house. It is sad that she did not know my grandmother though. She barely knew my mother. I had children when I was older and we didn’t live close to my family anymore. I hope she has sentimental attachment to some of these family things. . . . I hope my kids will feel as strongly about my possessions as I have, but I don’t think that is possible since they haven’t lived my life (Virginia, divorced, 84).

Many of our informants hoped that these cherished items will stay within their family lines for perpetuity.

Tactics

Kinship distance, gender, closeness, appreciation of mnemonic associations, valuing of the use value of objects, and control (see below) are all tactical considerations in intergenerational transmission expressed by our informants.

Maddie wants to transfer the object to a particular gender but also to someone with whom she is close. She considers kinship distance in her deliberations. Implied here is the idea that a close relationship also entails a history of conveying feelings and experiences, including previous communications about the cherished item. However, aesthetic appreciation and mnemonic associations also figure into her calculations about to whom she should transfer the pin.

I have thought about it. I have two boys though. I guess if one of their wives wanted it I could give it to them. I am just not too close to them. Maybe I could give it to my granddaughter. She lives so far away. Next time I see her maybe I’ll bring it up and see what she thinks. It is beautiful and maybe she would appreciate it. I wonder if she will think it is too old fashioned and out of date. I just love it! …She will not have the memories I do when she looks at it (Maddie, married, 60’s).
Often disposition decisions are made during the older consumer’s lifetime so that the original owner can live to see the new owner enjoy their cherished possessions as Diane, age 70, and later Iris, age 78, both explain:

I love to give things to my children, if they like something. My Mother-in-law used to be that way toward me. If I went into her home and admired something, she’d want to give it to me. And I found myself doing the same thing. I think to see someone enjoy something that you’ve enjoyed would be nice, rather than waiting until you’re dead to pass them out (Diane, widowed, 70).

It is, if they like something, you know, I would rather they take it now. You know how it happens, when you are dying, everyone comes in. There is always a fight involved. I don’t care what, there’s always a fight over it. We would rather they get it before, and enjoy it while we are still around. And not fuss about it later (Iris, married, 78).

Many informants in fact, such as Charlie who is quoted below, view themselves as caretakers for cherished family possessions. Charles is 67 years old and living in his own home. To ensure that a cherished possession will be transferred forward through the family lineage, Charlie repeats a transfer ritual. He used a family tradition to pass forward a favorite set of golf clubs that his father had given to him to his son. Charles talks about missing them, but remarks, “. . .I knew this was what my father did for me, so I did it for my son.”

Emotions

Our informants illustrate ambivalent and complex emotions when talking about disposition of their cherished possessions, with both strong positive and strong negative feelings characterized. Iris explains vividly illustrates emotional triggers:

Tell you what, I go to estate sales all the time. And when I go, every time I go I realize that I have to do something. I must get rid of what I have. It is so sad (stresses the word sad), and there are these beautiful items that are being sold. They are practically giving them away. And people look at them, and these are people that cherished things, like we did in the past. And then you look, and think, look what is happening to them. Obviously, their
children didn’t want them. And people think nothing of it, and they try to bring the price down. And I think of these people, and of how they must have felt. They had all of this, and it meant so much to them. So, every time I go, I think: that’s not going to happen to me. (Iris, married, 78).

Associated with these emotions is the older consumer’s desire to exert some control over the future life of the cherished objects. By deciding to whom a cherished possession will be given, older consumers can help to ensure the future they desire for their cherished possessions long after they are gone.

Grandpa Louie broke down after describing some of his cherished possessions, tools that had belonged to his father and a coin collection. Alluding to the personal competencies symbolically represented in these objects, he says, “[I’m] happy in one sense and sad in another. I am happy that someone is going to get the coins and treasure them and I am even okay that no one would want my old junky tools, but I am sad because I am old.” Thinking about the objects evidently saddens some informants by evoking thoughts of past times and selves, works (collections), and departed loved ones (Belk 1991a, 1991b; Grayson and Shulman 2000; Richins 1994).

Our informants often face disposition with some dread. Their fear is linked to mingled concerns about loss of self identity, erasure of family traditions, absence of receptive recipients, or changes in family structure that threaten the objects’ worth as they are transferred from one complexly storied life to another. Ambivalence is also linked to anxieties about the future, as if the real value of cherished possessions lies in their ability to extend the past into the future. Such strong feelings help us account for the complexity of the tactics referred to above and represented in Figure 1.

PRESERVING FAMILY HEIRLOOMS
What becomes of cherished objects passed on to succeeding generations? First, if not already a legacy of a previous generation, is a change in the state of the cherished object. Progressing from one generation to the next makes a cherished object into an heirloom. Next, if previous caretakers tactics have been successful, new caretakers seem to engage in curatorial consumption (McCracken 1988), designed to preserve family heirlooms. Our informants often discuss a single object that they describe as a family heirloom. They feel these rare family items should be preserved; it is their claim to an ancestral past and family accomplishments. This desire for tokens of family continuity is widespread in our data, as is the competition that ensues to be the caretaker of the family heirloom and to pass it forward to future generations. How do they do this?

Sacred objects like heirlooms encompass both a visible, material component, and immaterial elements (stories of origin, secret chants, spells and names; Godelier 1999; Weiner 1992). Informants who strategize to create heirlooms from their cherished objects thus recognize the crucial role of storytelling in transferring heirlooms successfully. An excellent illustration surrounds a ring that Mrs. Thompson, age 72, wants to become an inalienable. The ring is a gift from Mrs. Thompson’s late husband Jeff, and she tells a detailed, emotional, and romantic story of how she came to have the ring. She plans to pass this to her only daughter Patricia, age 45, with whom she has a close affective relationship, noting “She has always seen it on me. The ring will always remind her of me after I am gone. To me that is important.” Here, she recognizes the legitimating potential of her own contamination of the ring, and the amalgamated stories and meanings that her daughter Patty will bundle with the ring. Telling the story of the object helps Mrs. Thompson to relive an important moment in her own history that coincides with a historical
moment in time (the end of World War II), and brings into the present a departed loved one (Price et al. 2000). Moreover, she tells the story for tactical reasons as well.

Consider also Robert, a caretaker of a ring that has been in his family for generations, tells us about the ring:

I have a solid gold ring, which I inherited from my father which was his grandfather’s ring that he brought back from California during the California Gold Rush. The ring weighs approximately two ounces, is solid gold, and very, very, soft. …The ring simply means a link to the past. My father’s grandfather walked to California from Indiana behind an ox team and spent five years in California working basically as a hired hand. There is kind of a family history about him being in California during the Gold Rush years and experiencing that along with the Wild West and Indians. Along the way there was some talk about meeting some famous characters, like Peg Leg Smith and to witness an Indian Massacre of a wagon train. So, every time I look at the ring I appreciate it more, because I know what he had to go through walking all the way to California to pursue a dream.

Storytelling was one of the most common means used by consumers to ensure that family members all understood the significance of their family heirlooms. By repeatedly telling the history of cherished possessions, family members come to understand the prominence of these items within their lineage. These stories are often told repeatedly, that is ritualistically, at family celebrations. They emerge as a tactic for establishing and maintaining the special significance of the object to the family. Often the older, current caretaker invests extra effort in ensuring that the future caretaker is well versed in the cherished possession’s origin story. And, the timing of the transfer of the object often rests upon the current guardian’s evaluation of the effectiveness of the retelling of the possession’s story. Also evaluated is the potential guardian’s commitment and dedication to preserving the object for future generations.

When the stories associated with the cherished possessions are shared with family members, those stories become part of the item’s meaning bundle. Significantly, such items can become iconic representations of family identity, such as being the kind of family that overcomes adversity represented in Robert’s story, above (Epp and Price 2008). Cherished possessions tend to
have layers of meanings, and often are layered with stories from the different generations that have held the object, as diagramed in Figure 2. A caretakers’ personal association with a family heirloom can also become part of the history of the item with another layer of meanings discussed during any ritualized use, maintenance or storytelling.

As Weiner (1992) insists, along with the stories, objects must be preserved, and rituals of use, display, and maintenance that give these possessions moral force must be passed forward as well if heirlooms are to become potentially inalienable possessions, sacred things held out from the market against all inducement.

Our informants provide numerous illustrations of how, as objects change in status, their display and usage alters. Josie, 83, describes a sword that belonged to her grandfather, a civil war veteran. He carried it with him at the battle of Vicksburg. She inherited it when she was only three, because she was “his namesake and his favorite grandchild,” and plans to pass it on to her grandson (John’s son and namesake). Although Josie has stories about the sword, she has no memories of her grandfather with the sword and only vague recollections of him (lack of contamination). Nevertheless, she preserves the sword, hides it when she leaves town, and sees it as a proud, distinct family possession to be kept by future generations.

A story about a collection of china, recently transformed from cherished object to heirloom and perhaps inalienable object, illustrates altered use and display to denote its status. Julie, age 21, describes her mother’s care in packing her great grandmother’s china as a signal of its singularity of meaning.

…And um, I just know they are very special to her, because every time we move and I help pack she makes sure. She wants me to be careful and not to break them. If they were to break you know, I… they probably would be irreplaceable and she’d be upset about it. I mean you may be able to find something like that but it’s just not the same once it’s given to you.
The china that Carol (Julie’s mother) can remember her grandmother using “on holidays when all the family got together,” is now prominently displayed in the china cabinet “one of the first rooms you see when you enter my house,” but is not for use, “just to admire and cherish.” Carol, age 55, explicitly frames the amalgam of meanings associated with the china, indicating with respect to her grandmother and mother, “So, you know, I’ve got something, a little bit of something from both of them.” She continues, noting, “then they will also be an extension of myself too, because they will have truly been passed from generation to generation…I would like to pass them along to one of my children one day.” Indeed, Julie would like to inherit this china. To her, the china manifests and legitimates a meaningful collective identity--family unity. She readily endorses and hopes to reproduce this value with her own children, “Um, they kind of just uh, to me it means family, it means unity. How we all still get along after all these years.” Julie observes that she will follow her mother’s pattern of use: “Well, I, I wouldn’t use it, I’d have it simply for show. Just to show it. I’d have it in my china cabinet and I would tell everybody the story how it went from generation to generation.”

As objects move from alienable object to heirloom, and on to inalienability, caretakers are likely to encase them in protected environments, subject them to ritualized use, and limit who handles them. Maria, age 49, explicitly notes in an interview with her daughter Claire that as she came to understand the significance of an object to the family, her own use of that object changed:

Your grandmother gave me the bracelet her mother gave her when she was born. I remember it from when I was little. I always loved it and Mama would let me wear it around the house if I asked. She gave it to me at my 46th birthday party. I cried because it meant a lot to me. I always wanted it. …She also told me to cherish it and give it to you when the time was right…It’s a dress-up bracelet so I only wear it on special occasions. It’s funny because when I was younger, when I would wear it when I was little, I would have worn it everyday all day. Now I see the importance in the bracelet and like your grandmother said, I will cherish it.
Similarly, Claire’s grandmother Frances, age 78, treasures crystal she inherited from her Aunt M (who was like a mother to her). She too indicates the narrowing of storage, use, and access that accompanied its conversion from alienable to inalienable.

    Not everyone can touch the crystal but they don’t want to because they are nervous they will break it. So they admire it in the china cabinet. …You might even one day have one of the crystal pieces in your house. If you do take care, I mean if you don’t want it give it to someone in the family. …When I moved I made sure those things were not broken when I moved, that they were packed by packers. Thank God they were not broken.

GUARDIANSHIP

Weiner (1992, p.104) remarks:

    Someone must attest to the authentication of a possession and to the history that surrounds it. And even when there are few inalienable possessions, someone must decide about their transmission within or, when necessary, outside the group. Those whose knowledge is honored by others enhance or diminish what an inalienable possession represents.

In contrast to work that has emphasized role withdrawal and simple disposition with age (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), many of our informants assume an active management role with regard to heirlooms. Some informants embrace the idea of guardianship as in the following comment from Joanna, who is in her late 60’s, as she describes her pleasure with being chosen as the caretaker of a bracelet that had belonged to a favorite grandmother:

    My grandmother died when I was a freshman in high school. She and I were really close. I think that added to my interest in a lot of her items. She passed on to me a bracelet that my grandfather had made for her when he was in the Navy. It means the world to me. Its something I could never replace. I was glad that out of the six grandkids, she recognized that I was the one that would treasure it the most. . . .I guess it’s a minor detail but when you think about it, it’s really the backbone of one’s heritage and family identity.

    Previous research on guardianship of heirlooms, including McCracken’s (1988) descriptive study of a contemporary caretaker, emphasizes kinship. Thus, one might expect our data to display patterns of guardianship distributed by kinship role. Previous research argues that gender too should exert a powerful role in assigning guardianship. However, we might also expect
guardianship of heirlooms to exhibit an elective quality in our late modern society (Giddens 1992; Smart and Neale 1999).

As in the example above, our results show that the preferred guardian for an heirloom object is generally a same gender descendent, (rather than an opposite gender descendent) or a same gender affine (kin through marriage). Amanda, age 22, speculates that if she inherits it, she will pass her grandmother’s ring to her daughter, if she has one, and to a daughter-in-law or granddaughter, if she does not. For her part Sheila, age 50, laments that she has no daughters to whom to give her jewelry, hopes for granddaughters, and wants to be sure that a daughter-in-law earns her trust before passing any jewelry her way. These cases are typical.

As is true in traditional societies, informants take guardianship of inalienable possessions seriously. Edith, age 65, has instilled in all her children the belief that family heirlooms are precious and must be preserved along with their fragile texts. Her son Stanley, age 28, is acting to preserve and pass on the watch he inherited from his grandfather. He remarks,

Starting now, even before the children, I would like to think about the objects that I would consider leaving to my children and the reasons why. I feel that they deserve an explanation as to why I would leave them the objects. This can be more special than the objects themselves.

Edith, emphasizing the family identity connotations of heirlooms, even counsels the interviewer:

Treasure any heirlooms that your family may give to you as they hold great memories and associations with your family and its members…The events that transpire throughout your life and objects that you acquire are what make up your life.

Edith clearly opines that guardianship of inalienable wealth provides identity, and links current generations to a stream of ancestors that constitute their social distinction (Epp and Price 2008). She and her children feel responsible for preserving family objects and communicating their power and meaning to future generations.
Other informants consistently acknowledge obligations and responsibilities to keep objects out of the market, teach others their stories, and socialize future caretakers. Clara is a 29-year-old single mother of a young daughter. Like her grandmother, now in her 70s, whom we also interviewed, she judges that certain objects should be kept in the family. Clara describes her daughter as like her—“she values things.” After supporting that claim with several stories, she concludes,

“and that’s the other thing, I think it’s my duty to raise her to value not only the things of the present but the things of the past. And if I, if I teach her right, I won’t have to worry about where those items go” (emphasis added).

With heirlooms come responsibilities for the ritualized use of heirloom objects mentioned above. Several instances in our data depict ritual obligations to the greater family unit accompanying guardianship of heirlooms. Commonly these ritual obligations have to do with “keeping the family history,” “keeping the family together,” or a combination of these two themes.

Melinda, age 43, is the caretaker of a marble-topped table inherited from her grandmother who tellingly was “always the one that pulled us together as a family.” When Melinda inherited the table, she discovered her siblings expected her to take on their grandmother’s kin-keeping role:

…it was interesting that one of my cousins...shortly after Grandmother passed away and we were all together and he said, "Now Melinda, you’re the matriarch of the family." And, I thought that was really interesting and it scared me a little bit that he thought of me that way because Grandmother always was the one that pulled us all together as a family... it was because of Grandmother that we all congregated together to really be with her, you know, because she was just so special. So, I think that was kind of interesting that he had looked to me that I was going to, you know, be able. And, that's a lot of responsibility. (Melinda, married, 43)

Melinda observes that this is a difficult job because her grandmother’s three sons don’t get along well. Still her cousin looks to her as the matriarch of the family. Symbolically the guardian of this table is charged with using the power imbued in it to keep the family together. Melinda,
like the tribal caretakers of inalienable wealth (Weiner 1992; Godelier 1999) should use the table to benefit the whole kin group, in this case her extended family.

**TRANSMISSION AND INALIENABLE WEALTH**

We found very interesting parallels between heirloom objects and sacred possessions in tribal societies anthropologists call “inalienable wealth.” One characteristic of inalienable wealth is its capacity to speak to and for an individual’s or a group’s social identity and affirm felt differences between one person or group and another (Weiner 1992, 43). Thus, in our data, we find comments like,

[Referring to a 102 year old watch that still “runs perfectly to the second”] That was really a masterpiece kind of thing, and I know when I see my mother wear it that she is connecting with her own family…and so I think it was not just a family heirloom as much as it was a symbol of the kind of people they were. They were precise…they valued things; they hung onto things and after going through the depression, they placed a lot of value on something like a fine watch.  (Linnea, 45yrs old).

A second characteristic of inalienable wealth is legitimating power derived from origins thought to lie “in some sacred, changeless order …” (Godelier 1999, 124). Thus, in our data, we find references to heirloom Christian texts, and in the following excerpt, specific reference to the heirloom as a source of legal legitimacy,

The Bible, I always remember it being in the family. My grandparents, and then my mother was the oldest daughter, so she got it, and then I got it and I will pass it to my oldest daughter. So it’s at least four generations right now…Because that Bible is so old, and it has all of the births and deaths and marriages. So it is used as a legal register (Della 93 years old).

Third, caretakers fear loss of inalienable possessions because loss places at risk the special knowledge and attributes that define the group (Kirsch 2001, 177).
Yes, I have leather suitcases. I forgot about them until we started talking about them. They were my grandparents. They were leather bound everywhere, um, they are in mint condition with silk lining. They are heavy even when nothing is in them. I’m afraid to even use them, because I’m afraid that they will get stolen. …They will be passed down through my generation, kids hopefully (Phyllis, 32 years old).

Fourth, caretakers possess inalienable objects, but do not have ownership them, instead they are owned by the lineage, that is, by the family (Godelier 1999; Weiner 1992). Our data provides evidence that these items have porous ownership boundaries:

My mother left me household items like dishes, which are very valuable today. . . .The dishes remind me of my mother. They’ve been passed down through the family tree. . . .I plan on passing my mother’s dishes to my daughters to continue the tradition. . . .Certain things like my mother’s dishes, I will never get rid of. But I will pass them on to my daughters (Ginny, widowed, 72).

As with Melinda’s table mentioned above, inalienable objects may be used, but the positive effects that emanate from the powers contained in these objects must be shared with the group (Godelier 1999, p.122). Thus, in our data we find that heirlooms may be used to stimulate collective memories and moral tales:

I: Are there any special occasions that you think you would bring out the blankets to share with people?
R: When we have family gatherings at my house, I would love to bring out the quilt to show the family and all sit around and talk about our memories. I feel that would be a very special time to share the quilt (Jan, 31 years old).

Finally, there are aspects of inalienable possessions that demarcate group membership both via inclusion and through exclusion. On the one hand, in order for objects to remain inalienable, the normative social order and reality legitimated by these objects must be accepted and shared by the members of the group. Our informants’ emic understanding of this principle is typically encoded in remarks about the “importance” of family and family “history:”

There are a lot of memories associated with each of these teacups and my daughter would love to hold onto those memories and share them with her children and grandchildren. I realize that the significance of the tea cup set from my father will not be the same for
someone else but my daughter places a lot of importance on family and the history of our family.

On the other hand, while people outside the group may decode some of the public meanings of inalienable wealth, the sacred meanings shared by members of the group resist expression and representation, thus are relatively inaccessible to outsiders (Godelier 1999). Themes of family unity, overcoming adversity, craftsmenship, and so on, have been evoked above. Dorothy, 75, discusses the fragile sacred meanings of inalienable wealth. She received a christening dress from her mother-in-law, who in turn, received it from hers. Dorothy christened her two sons in it, and prevailed upon her daughter-in-law to christen her first son in it. She is unsure whether her second grandson was christened in it. According to tradition, someone outside the family (affine) must keep the heirloom in the family. Therefore, the heirloom’s status as an inalienable possession is precarious. Dorothy, separated by kinship and geographical distance from her daughter-in-law, expresses considerable anxiety about the future of the object, asking “how can we (the older generation) pass this caring about cherished things on?”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to extend knowledge about connections between cherished objects, heirlooms and inalienable wealth broached anecdotally in previous research, and of necessity how older consumers manage their cherished possessions. We specifically aimed to identify practices differentiating these items. In this way, we sought to explore behaviors not previously theorized in consumer culture and to inspire investigation of the domain of inalienability. Our data show that heirlooms passed from one generation to another differ from individuals’ cherished objects. Heirlooms reflect contamination with a previous owner and affective intergenerational ties between owners. Inalienable wealth differs from heirlooms by
virtue of being actively invested with the properties summarized above (see also Curasi et al. 2004). Our point is not to reify the terms cherished possessions, heirlooms, or inalienable wealth, but to insist on useful analytical differences between these constructs.

Of course, first of all our research shows unequivocally that some if not all middle class Americans seek to collect and pass forward the history, achievements and identities of ancestors. Data presented above also affirms that positive contamination of the object through prolonged contact with a respected elder kinsperson helps preserve cherished objects for one generation. However, successful transfers between generations foreground object meanings through storytelling and employ tactics to mobilize kinship distance, closeness, and caretaking tendencies in target recipients. But many informants are very concerned about the preservation of heirlooms in subsequent generations. Our research showed that storytelling, and distinctive practices of use and display are necessary, if not sufficient conditions for preserving heirlooms. We also find that heirlooms are an important source of personal identity and family distinction, a fact evident across tales of Civil War swords, Gold Rush rings, two hundred year-old watches, and many more prosaic items. Finally, it may not be stretching the analogy to claim that some heirloom objects become inalienable wealth, objects whose sacred status requires they be held back from market logic and market exchange at all costs.

Perhaps from the standpoint of theorizing old age, our research leads to a different perspective on older consumers from the image of cognitive deterioration and increased vulnerability, typical of consumer behavior research (Moschis 1994). In our research, we discover that older consumers act as conscientious and proactive guardians of special objects for future generations, even when they are surprised when called upon to do so. They employ stories, ritualized use, storage, and display, and meaning-matching with potential heirs to protect these
objects. And they try to use cherished inherited objects to convey values and meanings of significance to their kin.
REFERENCES


Rosenfeld, Jeffrey (1979), “Old Age, New Beneficiaries: Kinship, Friendship, and (Dis)Inheritance,” *Sociology and Social Research*, 64, (October), 86-98.


Figure 1
Heirlooms: Personal and Collective Meanings

Parent or Grandparent

Create/Produce Meaning

Personal Meanings

Owner

Hold/Transfer Meaning

Collective Meanings

Caretaker

Recipient

Shared Meanings
- untold stories
- inconsistent meanings
- different tastes & aesthetics

Invention of Tradition
- Add historical depth
- Rules governing bloodlines and gender
- Ritual based
Figure 3

Elements Facilitating the Creation and Sustenance of Inalienable Possessions

- **Personal Cherished Possession**
  - Values & Beliefs
  - Events
  - Friends & Loved Ones
  - Future Intentions

- **Storytelling**
  - Maintenance
  - Use

- **Receiver’s Relationship with Donor**

- **Receiver’s Appreciation of Family History**

- **Inalienable Possession**
  - Values & Beliefs
  - Events
  - Future Intentions
  - Friends & Loved Ones

Time ➤ Time ➤ Time

Moderating Elements