Conceptualizing and Exploring Couple Dyads in the World of Collecting

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ABSTRACT
Despite a growing body of literature on collecting, collections and collectors, we still know very little about collecting in the context of families and coupledom. This study offers a conceptualization to examine the social world of collecting couples, suggesting that their experiences may be understood by reference to three sets of forces which focus on aspects of the collector's social world, their need for legitimization and for material culture. Data from dyadic ethnographic interviews is discussed in the context of these forces and used to generate insights into the collaborative and co-operative behaviors of couples who collect.

INTRODUCTION
This study addresses a significant gap in the literature on collecting as a form of consumption behavior, namely the lack of research into dyadic behaviors within the world of collecting. We therefore focus on the consumption attitudes and behaviors of couples who collect, and begin by conceptualizing the social world and the shared meanings which couples ascribe to their collecting activity, and how coupledom influences the individual in this context. The study is informed by prolonged insider participant observation in the collecting world, absorbing the 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen 1988). In line with Penaloza's (1994) approach to ethnography, we take an a priori view of this world, that play, love and gender are salient themes/factors that underpin the attitudes and behaviors of couples interacting in their social worlds.

We begin by briefly describing the growing interest of consumer researchers in collectors, collections and collecting, before providing a literature review focusing on social identity, love, play, gender and social processes. After this, the theoretical orientations of the study are briefly set out, including a description of the methods of data collection and analysis. The findings from long-term participant observation, combined with data from ethnographic interviews with eight couples in an European setting are then presented, interpreted and discussed. The study of dyadic couples allows us to identify important under-theorized dimensions of collecting behavior, notably the dynamics of collaborative and co-operative behaviors amongst collectors, and the influence of the social world, in many guises, on the individual collector.

DEFINITIONS: COLLECTORS AND COLLECTING
Collecting has been defined (Arnould, Zinkhan and Price 2004:146) as the “selective, active and longitudinal acquisition, possession, and disposition of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings, or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning for the set itself". Purposeful collecting occurs when there is a strong element of aesthetic discrimination involved (Herrman, 1972:8) and when the owner has acquired sufficient objects of a kind and enough connoisseurship to impress the professionals active in the same field (Herrmann, 1972). This latter definition explicitly acknowledges the importance of social influences upon collectors. Public interest in collecting has grown exponentially in recent years, spanning themes from low culture to high culture. Pearce (1998) estimates that one in three members of the UK and North American population is, or has at some time been, a collector. Gender and socio-economic analysis suggests that collectors mirror national demographic trends with few defining social or class characteristics and this seems to be the case in both the UK (Pearce 1998) and in the US (Baker and Martin, 2000, Slater, 2000).

With regard to the nature of collecting, there is much information about individual collectors, but our knowledge of couples as consumer-collectors is almost non-existent. Johnston and Beddows' short study (1986) of two couples—one male/female couple, one male/male couple—is a rare exception. To remedy this knowledge gap, we now set out a literature review that explicitly focuses on collecting as viewed in the wider context of family, groups and the social world.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Our discussion of the literature starts by focusing on aspects of collecting at the primary conceptual level: subjects, objects and group influences. We then move from the primary level to the secondary conceptual level, where the primary themes interact by means of three mediating forces: the social world, a need for legitimization, and subject-object relationships within a material culture setting. Bringing together these forces has allowed us to generate new insights into the meaning of possessions and collecting relationships.

COLLECTORS IN THEIR SOCIAL WORLDS
Collectors and collections are found within a social consumption framework that operates in private family settings; in semi-public spaces such as collectors’ clubs; in public spaces such as auctions; and in informal spaces such as fairs and car boot sales. The behaviors of individual collectors, and the consumption spaces in which these behaviors occur, have been explored by consumer researchers, yet we know very little about collecting in the context of families and coupledom. Most studies of collectors have remained focused on the individual, largely to the exclusion of the wider context of couples, family and group membership. Studies that do focus on shared experiences have addressed aspects of the sense of shared selves (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005), also wider aspects of collective behavior (Hogg and Abrams, 1998).

Linking up the literature to our conceptual approach, we examine the forces that mediate the collecting behaviour of dyads below, in order to show how collectors’ experiences as dyads differ from that which might be expected from individual collectors. We seek to represent the full lived experiences of collectors, rather than narrower aspects of collecting.

I. The social world
The first set of relationships concerns the interactions between the individual or couple collector(s) of a particular category of object and other collectors of the same items. These social relationships between individuals, couple collector(s) and other collectors represent the influence of group pressure on the consumption experiences and behaviors of individual collectors.

The self-concept is derived from both social identity and personal identity (Turner, 1982), and the two components may be integrated, congruent self-identifications, or they may be distinct and contradictory (Hogg and Abrams, 1985). Therefore to examine personal aspects of identity affected by collecting without consideration of the social-identity function is unlikely to yield a full understanding of collectors and collecting. However, what we do
know is that material possessions and collections are part of the self-identity of UK and US collectors (Hirschman, 1980; Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992) and that self-identity through possessions changes over the course of an individual’s life (Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995).

For some, collecting is significantly influenced by aspects of the social world: it may be a source of social prestige (Herrmann, 1972) and an opportunity to socialize with other collectors in ways that may yield satisfaction well beyond the economic aspects of their collections (Belk, 2001). Some collectors become active participants in collectors’ clubs or interest groups, meeting on a regular basis with other collectors (Dannefer 1980; Baker and Martin, 2000; Slater, 2000; Kozinets, 2001). Collecting may also be viewed as a form of adult competition and play (Glancy, 1988, Olmstead, 1991, Pearce, 1998) and play may occur at the aesthetic or at the intellectual level (Pearce, 1998) and in a variety of social settings. Social aspects of play may occur as a result of the collector’s decision to share access to their sacred things (Belk et al., 1989) or to attend the play-world setting of the auction (Glancy, 1988).

Many collectors live in households alongside other family members who also collect, and collecting has been noted as a potentially bonding activity for couple-collectors (Belk and Wallendorf, 1997). Collecting couples could be expected to demonstrate shared selves (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005) in respect of their collecting, and to derive common identities both from their collectivism, and from common membership of groups outside the family (Prentice, Miller and Lightdale, 1994). Such couples may collect the same or very similar themes and items, and they could be forecast to represent a special case of collecting behavior worth studying for the light that they potentially throw on collecting in particular, and consumption in general.

2. The legitimizing function

A second set of relationships concerns the role of group authentication, validation and approval of certain objects as being collectable. In the context of collecting, the “group” may consist of participants in a collecting society or club; the network of dealers who source and supply the collectables; the experts seen in various media; the “other half” of the husband/wife unit; the family; or indeed any combination of these. Objects may be categorized as sacred when they become collectable (Holt, 1995) and hence the legitimizing function may act, for some people, as the sacralizer. For some, collecting is an aspirational activity focused on the acquisition of cultural capital and the demonstration of good taste (Bourdieu, 1986). Objects have to become worthy of being collected, and this may be a function of expert opinion or a function of society’s judgement on our taste in “things” (Rook, 1991). This implicit need for approval echoes McCracken’s (1981:582) analysis of the transfer of meaning from the “culturally constituted world” to the individual consumer, with fashion and taste serving to create a legitimacy climate mediated through “the trade” i.e. the companies and dealers in antiques and collectables. The trade makes objects and makes them available to meet collectors’ demand, for the purposes of collecting. Collectors may also need to negotiate permission to collect from parents, as adding to the collection may incur significant expenditure, and also may impact upon the home environment, where individuals construct personal meaning through environmental schematization (Holahan, 1978) and the appropriation of space (Ingold, 1986) and place.

What is important to note is that the “group” performing the legitimizing function may be a couple, or a family, or a social set, or an expert set. All may have some degree of legitimizing power stemming from personal or social relationships, or from expert knowledge.

3. Material culture and subject-object relationships

Material culture approaches to the consumption phenomenon focus on the relationship of individual collectors to their (usually) man-made objects (e.g. Lovatt, 1997, Pearce, 1998). This sphere of subject-to-object relationships is well-documented in the UK and the US: collecting is a culturally acceptable device for gaining an expanded sense of self (Belk 1988; Rigby and Rigby 1944); for improving self-esteem through a sense of mastery (Danet and Katriel, 1986); and as an act of love (Belk and Coon, 1993; Baudrillard, 1994; Slater 2000). The unifying theme for all collectors is the intrinsic need to re-stabilise the ego in order to regain self-composure and equilibrium by means of acquiring possessions (Muensterberger, 1994) and they may be passionate, cool or even obsessive (Olmstead, 1991) about their collections.

Unlike ordinary objects of consumption, collections tend to take on an importance and character comparable in some respects to that of family members (Belk et al., 1991). The importance of ‘love’ attached to collections can be seen in the heartache associated with the disposition of treasured possessions by elderly consumers (Price, Arnould and Curasi, 2000).

Even children as collectors seem to be influenced by social factors (Baker and Gentry, 1996) and feel it is important to have their own possessions for developing their sense of self (Dittmar, 1992). However the detailed process of organizing and codifying a collection is usually a more solitary activity. Belk and Wallendorf (1997:251) have noted that collecting permits “experimentation with androgyny as an individual participates in the masculine hunt for additions to the collection as well as the feminine nurturance in curating the collection”.

Table 1 captures the different effects and satisfactions generated by the three categories outlined above. Having conceptualized the social, legitimizing and material world of the collector into these three categories, we now go on to examine a neglected aspect of consumption—that of couples and the differing context that a dyadic relationship creates for a collector.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION OF THIS STUDY

The research is ideographic rather than nomothetic (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) in that it is an intensive study of relatively few cases followed by abduction, or identification of patterns (Hanson, 1958). In the tradition of ethnographic research, multiple data collection methods such as observational data, audio recordings, handwritten notes, and non-directive and directive ethnographic interview techniques (Holt 1997; Elliott, 1999) have been used. For analysis, we have tackled back and forth between the parts of the whole, identifying emerging categories, and also examining existing categories derived from the literature review and our conceptual ideas, following the style of earlier researchers (e.g. Fournier and Mick 1999). The data has been iteratively analysed until it has reached the point of saturation, where new insights cease to emerge.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Participants: Couples were recruited through contacts established by means of one author’s participation in the collecting world, and an overview of the couple dyads can be seen in Table 2. The sampling plan was purposeful (Thompson and Troester, 2002) in its aim of seeking couples at various stages of immersion in collecting and collectivism, rather than seeking a statistically representative sample. The couples were interviewed with the aim of exploring the nature of collectivism and its effects upon individual
collectors as consumers. Their responses have been examined in relation to our conceptual ideas in order to provide further insights into the relationship between subjects, objects, and groups.

Interviews: The interviews lasted, on average, around two hours, and were conducted in dyads’ homes. Pre-prepared or set questions were avoided in order to preserve the style of the ethno-graphic interviewing approach (Holt, 1997). However, some specific areas of interest were woven into the interviews, focusing discussion onto joint decisions about purchase, storage and display; the shared and separate meanings which surrounded their collection(s); and the expense represented by collecting. Direct and indirect but unscripted questions were used to probe these issues. Couples were interviewed as dyads, and at intervals, as individuals, in their homes. Informal member checks (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989) were incorporated verbally during interviews, and return visits were made where appropriate.

FINDINGS

The meaning of collected possessions and collecting relationships for the dyads

Generating insights gained by focusing our study on the social world, on the need for legitimization and on material culture, we combine all of these to offer a deeper view of how collecting creates

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<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>EFFECTS &amp; SATISFACTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Relationships</td>
<td>Mutual satisfactions of common identity and common membership of the collecting world, within and outside the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimizing Function</td>
<td>Satisfactions gained directly and indirectly through the transfer of meaning from the wider world to the individual collector; the need for approval and permission.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material Culture</td>
<td>The satisfaction and security gained by the collector from “having things” and sharing living space with them.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Age profile of dyads</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dyad 1: mid-late 30s;</td>
<td>Carl: caretaker. Collects scout badges &amp; scouting memorabilia</td>
<td>Dawn: main child carer; and part-time retail worker. Collects juvenile character merchandise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad 3: late 50s</td>
<td>Barry: self-employed gardener. Collects old picture postcards; lantern slides; Staffordshire figures</td>
<td>Lesley: part-time catering worker. Collects small decorative objects; pictures; textiles; Staffordshire figures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dyad 4: mid 60s</td>
<td>Tom: retired schoolteacher. Collects: stamps; postmarks; postal history; minerals</td>
<td>Jill: retired schoolteacher. Collects chinaware; toy lorries; Russian enamels; minerals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad 5: early 60s</td>
<td>Dave: accountant. Collects: postcards; local history; Viewmasters and slides; items connected to Venice and Cologne</td>
<td>Janet: schoolteacher. Collects: decorative items eg cats, ducks, penguins; Venice; Cologne; paperweights; picture postcards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad 6: late 50s, early 60s</td>
<td>Gerald: retired engineer. Collects pictures, prints and decorative items representing horses; military vehicles</td>
<td>Teresa: author Collects items connected to the 1940s eg clothing, menus, paperwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad 8: late 50s, early 60s</td>
<td>Jack: ancillary service worker. Collects decorative ware and picture postcards</td>
<td>Sandra: schoolteacher. Collects decorative ware; and picture postcards</td>
</tr>
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meaningful life experiences for collectors. We also examine the social and personal collecting relationships that mediate the collecting urge.

Meanings aligned to social forces

Carl uses his collection to maintain the link with his former social world as a scout and scoutmaster, before family life created more demands on his time and his income. Collecting scouting memorabilia maintains his sense of belonging to the social world of the scout movement, despite no longer being active within it. Carl is very keen to show off his collection to anyone who takes an interest, but he feels despondent that few show any interest in it. Dawn, his wife has, for now, stopped collecting, but is still active in encouraging Carl to buy the objects that he is clearly desperate to buy. Indeed, she goes further by rationalizing the purchasing decision for him, as a sign of encouragement; otherwise, Carl is “worried sick” about spending money that he needs for the family.

Dawn’s leisure activity is as a local history expert for the area. For her, the sentimental value of objects—that this accuracy is vital to the integrity and credibility of his collecting urge.

A recurring theme for dyads such as Teresa and Gerald, Dave and Janet, and Barry and Lesley, is the encroaching tide of “things” taking over the household space and the pressing need to organize or dispose of hitherto treasured possessions that express shared and self-identity. Janet admits that the church-like atmosphere of parts of the house, created by the display of religious artifacts, was not to the liking of Dave or her daughters, and some items had to be packed away to make the house more homely.

Meanings aligned to the need for legitimization

The second set of interactions concern the role of group authentication, validation and approval of certain objects as being collectable i.e. those influences upon collectors that indicate that objects are worthy of collecting, and that he or she has permission to buy. Happy to trust his own judgement as an experienced collector, Carl is not worried about spending money buying something that is intrinsically poor: “it’s only a thin, tinny-type rubbish really, in the sense of what it’s made of, but it’s lovely”. He knows that even an item like this is well valued in the scouting collector circles. He sometimes wears one of his scout badges in the spirit of “Look at me!”.

Barry’s leisure activity is as a local history expert for the area where he was born and bred. He is invited to give talks to local societies, and expands his collection with a view to adding items that can be used for his talks. His purchasing is therefore driven, to some extent by his position in his social world, and the contribution that collecting makes to his social capital. Lesley, his wife, actively supports Barry by accompanying him to his talks, and clearly gets pleasure from doing so. Barry worries for days if he thinks he has overspent on collectables, and Lesley has to encourage him to buy things for his collection: “I remember having to convince you about those lantern slides. I said to Barry “Look there’s about £200 left”. I said: ‘Have that money’. He had all this sorting out to do and I was ill and everything. He would have regretted not having this.” Lesley recalls another occasion: “We had a spell about 3 years ago. He was very quiet for about 4 days... He had spent some money and felt really bad”.

A major worry for Tom is the prospect of losing the valuable postal history that he collects. He believes his collection to be historically important, and is worried at the possibility of it going up in flames, never to be recreated. This fear drives his social behavior. He prefers to think that his (or their) collection is of use to someone, so he and Jill have loaned it to a local museum so that it is actively used. Meanwhile, both Tom and Jill use their collections to give talks at the local collecting club, and get pleasure from this. As a couple with high cultural capital, they seek out diverse educational and informative experiences that allow them to achieve competence, acquire knowledge and express themselves creatively (Holt, 1998) through collectors’ club memberships, but they have been disappointed by the competitive atmosphere of other clubs they have joined in the past.

But Jill is generally relaxed about Tom spending large sums of money on his postal history collection. She, on the other hand, delights in picking up unrecognized, cheap pieces of china on a
hunch. Tom is probably the collector who seems most concerned about investment, and he uses this to encourage Jill to spend, although she finds it difficult to spend a lot of money on collectables—it does not come easily to her.

Jill regularly seeks the approval of her expert friends—china dealers and collectors—who affirm and confirm her judgement in identifying obscure items. Whilst Tom asserts vehemently that he is not interested in the accolade of best collection in his field—‘it’s my own private collection and that’s it!’—he does want his completed collections to be used and to be useful. He also likes his/their expertise to be recognized as such by experts, such as the university professors with whom he negotiated to secure a home for his and Jill’s collection of rocks or minerals, a collection now on permanent loan.

Carl seeks Dawn’s agreement to dropping in to visit antique fairs when they have a day out. On these occasions, Dawn often strongly urges Carl to buy an item if he sees something he likes, and she rationalizes the decision for him: he will never see it again; he will not be able to afford it if it comes up again; he can have it as a gift:

“She’d say ‘You’ve got to have it! You’ve got to have it’ and I’m saying ‘Hang on, hang on, we don’t know how much it is yet’ and you may go into this shop or pick it up off the stall, and it might have a price on. Then Dawn’ll say ‘Well you can have that for your birthday present this year and Christmas present next year, or …’ and encourage me to try and have it, because she knows that I won’t spend money on … £40 or £50 or £90 or £100, if I think my girls need a pair of socks, pair of shoes, a new coat, we’re going to take them out to the theatre, whatever. There’s a line got to be drawn and I have to draw it myself.”

Jennifer does not seek permission from Richard for any of her doll purchases, but she was nevertheless reluctant to say out loud the exact cost of her most expensive doll, and compromised by writing down the sum for the interviewer. Richard, meanwhile, spends only small sums that are too modest to require mutual consideration and which would be unlikely to harm family finances. A recurring theme between most of the couples, then, is the need to legitimize the expenditure incurred through collecting, either directly, through verbal agreement, or indirectly, through avoidance behavior of one sort or another.

Meanings aligned to material culture

This aspect concerns the relationship of individual collectors to their (usually man-made) objects—i.e. individual subject-to-object relationships. Carl gets “the buzz” from collecting objects and is “ripped apart” by the prospect of not being able to buy something he has seen. He tries not to leave a venue without buying something; he is scared of missing things if he does not go around an antique fair systematically, but acknowledges he would need to be a millionaire to buy it all. Commitment to family life heavily constrains Carl in terms of how much he may spend and how much time he can devote to collecting. He is constantly trading off his delight in the objects he wants to buy, the “buzz” he gets from them, and the dissonance he feels when tempted to spend beyond his means:

“It’s been wrapped up in a bag, and I’ve thought, ‘I haven’t got this badge and I’m over the moon’—someone else might say ‘How much? You must be mental!’ But I’m happy, and I think ‘That’s my badge’ and you’re like proud to put it in your collection, one more off a list of million badges to buy.”

Whilst he has many prints and pictures on the wall, and badges in display cases, he has long sought a particular item: a metal bust of Baden Powell, founder of the Scout movement. This is an item to hold, as opposed to something he simply looks at. Dawn, whilst still deriving pleasure from her collections, has sold some objects to create space in their house.

Alec, like Tom, positions himself as a guardian of history; an expert collector who has to use premier auctions to source new items for his collection. Lesley and Barry, like Tom and Jill, already have some completed collections—for instance their collection of Staffordshire figures, which they recently completed when they found one particularly rare item, in good condition. Lesley now looks for small objects that will fit into their tiny cottage, or that can be hung on the wall. Barry’s slides pack up easily into boxes—he does not need to be able to see these, as display is achieved through his talks.

Tom’s worry about losing his collection through accident or misfortune is underpinned by his belief that these items are representative of history and of interest to the wider world. Although he likes to have the originals, he does not hesitate to allow his material to be photocopied—unlike many other collectors. Like Barry, Tom uses objects to recreate and to understand history, and this is a recurring theme in his conversations, as is the issue of how much he has paid for something, and its current market value. In fact, he uses the argument that as collectors, he and Jill are saving history whilst at the same time making an investment. Jill is not so relaxed about spending money on collecting, but happily supports Tom if convinced that he is buying good quality items for investment purposes, which implicitly minimises the downside risk.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Possessions, collecting relationships & conflict: interfaces

For most of the eight couples interviewed, the dominant mood is one of co-operation in creating joint, shared meanings from collecting. However, in situations where the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible (eg Tom and Jill, Alec and Jane), the final outcome may be a combination of each person’s assertiveness and co-operativeness and their conflict handling modes, which might range from competing, collaborating, compromising, and avoiding through to accommodating modes (Thomas, 1976).

Couples negotiate the issue of displaying controversial items by implicitly accepting the premise that consumption objects can be polysemic symbolic resources with multiple meanings (Holt 1997) that allow for significant variation in consumer interpretation and use. Normally, in gendered situations where family conflict must be resolved, it seems that the husband has the final say (Gentry et al, 2003) but in Alec and Jane’s case, Jane is exercising her power of veto regarding the display of Alec’s collection, due to the strength of feeling on her part. Tom and Jill also have very different notions of what is worth collecting and what is not, but they have collaborated to find integrative solutions on the matter of financial outlay as have Jane and Alec. Equally, Barry and Lesley seem to cope with their limited budget and shortage of house space by negotiating on a purchase-by-purchase basis, and there is a great sense of mutually accommodating behavior to resolve these problems.

Other couples use avoiding behavior: for instance Jennifer avoids discussing the cost of her purchases with Richard, and given their relative affluence, neither is willing to give or receive full information that might potentially spark off unnecessary conflict. Furthermore, many of the couples have reached agreement that shared consumption patterns need not involve consuming the same consumption objects, and that social meaning can be found in consumption/collecting practices, not necessarily in the consump-
tion/collection of objects. Carl uses avoiding behavior not in relation to his wife, Dawn, but in relationship to the objects that he desires, and he avoids seeing them in order to avoid being tempted to buy them. Dawn in turn simply accommodates Carl’s collecting, despite having effectively stopped collecting herself, due to time and money pressures.

Few couples seem to be actively competing, although where there were common collecting themes shared within the dyad, there was a tendency for some husbands (eg Tom and Jack) to appropriate ownership of their wives’ objects as part of their own collection. These transgressions were swiftly corrected by Jill and Sandra, their respective wives, with pointed comments such as “Whose collection?”; an attempt on their part to reclaim their own cherished objects (Price, Arnold and Curasi, 2000), to establish limits to shared selves (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005) and perhaps also to discourage any possibility of their self-identity being appropriated, despite the verbal appropriation of the object by the husband. These mis-appropriations did not seem to happen when women talked about collecting, and in the cases above, occurred despite the fact that both Tom and Jack talked mainly of “our” collection. There seemed a greater tendency with some husbands for “ours” to become “mine”.

In summary, our research supports the premise of Burch (1969) that leisure behavior is the product of both interactionist (relationship-based) and structural (social circles within communities) forces. These categories resonate with the social forces and the legitimation function expressed in our conceptualization and are clearly underpinned by the third element, material culture, and the subject-object relationships of collectors with their collections. Other frameworks also seem to fit our conceptualization of dyad consumption, as categorized below by Holt (1995)

- Consumption as play: using consumption objects as resources to interact with fellow consumers. This aligns with aspects of both material culture (objects collected for play) and the social world (the social interactions of collectors).
- Consumption as integration: integrating consumption objects into one’s identity such that they become self-extensions. This aligns with subject-object relationships within material culture; also the social world whereby consumers employ product symbolism to define social reality and to ensure that behaviors appropriate to that reality will ensue (Solomon, 1983).
- Consumption as experience: objects are embedded in the social world, which imparts to consumers a shared definition of reality by structuring perceptions of “the way things are in that world”. This aligns with our view of a legitimizing function that operates via the macro-level shared meanings that occur within the culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1981).
- Consumption as classification: engaging in actions that enhance one’s sense of affiliation eg (Holt, 1995). This aligns with our findings on how the dyads engage with their social worlds and their engagement with, for instance, collecting clubs and societies, auctions, social events and public talks.

So, our conceptualization can be aligned to the literature in a way that enhances, in an original way, our understanding of collecting and collectors. We have used this approach to explore three different forces that influence the social world of collectors, their judgements about their collecting practice, and their role in shaping and filtering the rituals of purchasing and possession, as well as the various effects and satisfactions created. We have been intent upon capturing and encompassing the whole “collecting experience”, and examining the impact of the family and social influences upon the collector, and the impact of the collector on the dyad. The next stage of our search for knowledge and understanding of collectors will focus more closely on attitudes to conflict and the way it might be handled and the further consideration of how behaviors are deployed by collectors, within dyads and in social settings. These lines of enquiry are consistent with growing wider interest in how the family contextualizes and shapes consumption behaviors.

**SELECTED REFERENCES**

(Full list available from the authors)


NEW PERSPECTIVES ON COMPULSIVE BUYING: ITS ROOTS, MEASUREMENT AND PHYSIOLOGY

SESSION OVERVIEW

Compulsive buying and other dysfunctional consumption behaviors have attracted substantial attention of consumer and other researchers in recent years. However, most research to date remains descriptive, and many theoretical, substantive and methodological issues remain unresolved.

The first paper provides a theoretical framework, specifically escape theory, to explain why people engage in a self-destructive behavior, such as compulsive buying. Escape theory maintains that for some people, self-awareness can be very painful. Usually, these people have self-expectations that are so high they are unable to fulfill them. To block-out the painful self-awareness, these people become totally absorbed in a task, such as buying, without considering long-range consequences. The paper suggests that compulsive buying can be explained as a manifestation of escape theory.

Using the theoretical foundations of compulsive buying, obsessive-compulsive disorder and impulse-control disorder, the second paper addresses a development of a scale that is geared toward measuring excessive buying of those consumers who overspend, but are not pathologically ill. Excessive buyers are defined as those who are preoccupied with buying, but who are, at times, able to resist the urge to do so. Pathological buyers, on the other hand are completely unable to control their urges to buy. Using two studies, the authors show the scale is both reliable and valid. Moreover, by developing a scale to measure excessive buying as a construct containing elements of both obsessive-compulsive and impulse-control disorders, an important methodological contribution is made to the literature.

The final paper takes a broader look at dysfunctional/destructive consumption behaviors in general, of which compulsive buying is one example. The author provides a biogenetics perspective to explain why consumers engage in compulsive/addictive/impulsive and novelty seeking behaviors. Specific portions of human brain, and ultimately the human genetic endowment appear to be responsible for the tendency towards such behaviors. The paper further discusses implications for public policy and treatment programs.

While the first two papers provide new theoretical and methodological perspectives on compulsive and excessive buying behavior specifically, the third paper places compulsive buying in a larger setting of other destructive consumption behaviors and provides a biogenetics explanation for why such behaviors occur. As a set, the three papers importantly advance knowledge on what compulsive buying is, what its causal roots are, and how to measure it. While compulsive buying and other dysfunctional consumption behaviors are important consumer behaviors, they have been investigated predominantly in the psychological and psychiatric journals, and only sporadically in the consumer research literature.

Dr. April Lane Benson (author of the widely acclaimed book I Shop, Therefore I am: Compulsive Buying and the Search for Self; in clinical practice for 25 years and developer of a program called Stopping Overshopping) served as a discussant of the session and offered the perspective of a clinician who has worked extensively with patients whose lives are negatively affected by compulsive buying disorder.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“A Theoretical Account for Compulsive Buying: An Application of Escape Theory”

Ronald J. Faber

The past 20 years has witnessed a huge growth in research on compulsive buying. However, most of this research has remained at a descriptive stage identifying variables that are related to compulsive buying, patterns of behavior, and related disorders. Factors linked to compulsive buying have included: 1) psychological factors such as low self esteem, depression, anxiety, and perfectionism; 2) biological ones reflected in the impact of drug therapies and neurotransmission, linkages to arousal, and personal and family histories of compulsive buying and related disorders; and 3) cultural ones such as gender roles, early childhood experiences and changing social norms and feeling of alienation.

One explanation for compulsive buying is that it serves as a form of mood manipulation for people who experience negative feelings (Faber and Christenson 1996). Research in psychology, communication and consumer behavior has found that people will engage in specific behaviors as a means to change undesirable mood states or to prolong more desirable ones. Studies of compulsive buyers have found that they are particularly prone to engage in this behavior when they are in negative mood states and their description of episodes of compulsive buying suggests that they experience these episodes in positive and arousing terms. Additionally, the compulsive buyers were far more likely to report that their mood states moved in a positive direction as a result of shopping than did the matched general consumers. Thus, compulsive buyers may engage in buying as a way to manage their mood states.

Jacobs (1989) proposed that there are two important components that make people susceptible to addictive or excessive behaviors. One is their ability to alter negative affective states and the second is their ability to change physiological arousal levels. He suggests that some people have a physiological resting state that they find aversive. To overcome this, they seek behaviors that can heighten or reduce their arousal level and they run the risk of becoming addicted to such activities or substances.

While both of these accounts for compulsive buying suggest what benefits the behavior may provide, they don’t fully address the fact that compulsive buying, by definition, leads to extreme negative consequences. For example, compulsive buying has been referred to as causing “excessive and inappropriate impairment in one or more life domains” (Black 2000), and marked distress that “interferes with social or occupational functioning” (Goldsmith and McElroy 2000). However, the literature on self-defeating behaviors has suggested that people are not prone to harming themselves (Baumeister and Scher 1988). Instead, such behaviors result from poor strategy choices that don’t work as intended, or from a conscious decision to engage in a negative behavior to avoid even more painful losses. This latter explanation has led to escape theory, which has been used to explain behaviors such as eating disorders and suicide. It is proposed here that escape theory may also provide the best theoretical account for why compulsive buyers engage in this destructive behavior.