Ambivalent Relationships and Projection Onto Indexical Objects

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Ambivalent Relationships and Projection onto Indexical Objects

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ABSTRACT

It is well-established in consumer culture theory that an object’s meaning often resides in its ability to represent or trigger memories of others or relationships with others. The context of familial intergenerational transfers of gifts and heirlooms has been a particularly fertile area for investigating this phenomenon. This article draws on the findings from a study of heirlooms. It merges insights from the semiotic perspective of objects representing others with a projection perspective where consumers project their ambivalence about relationships with others onto their relationships with the objects that index those others.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we focus on the projection of ambivalent feelings regarding relationships onto objects which index those relationships. We discuss the importance of the construct of projection in making sense of this behavior. This behavior is most pronounced when the feelings are negative and possibly even socially unacceptable. Three examples are drawn from a study of intergenerational transfers to illustrate this phenomenon. In our data, consumers act out their ambivalence about significant relationships with objects that index those relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ambivalence

Levy’s work demonstrates his “…preoccupation with the inherent ambivalence that characterizes and energizes our cognitive and emotional lives.” In “Stalking the Amphibiaena,” (1996/1999) he chooses the mythological creature with a head at both ends to symbolize that ambivalence. We recognized the ambivalence toward familial relations evident in our data and corresponding acting out behaviors directed toward indexical objects. As we reviewed the consumer behavior literature to glean an understanding of this behavior, we were able to build several models of signification to help us understand the relationships between the consumer, objects, the origin of the objects, and groups. Finally, we turned to the projection literature to better understand the acting out behavior that we saw emerging as a result of consumer ambivalence.

Objects Represent Others

Consumers often have special possessions that represent other people in their lives. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) find that, when asked to name their favorite things, many people identify photographs, heirlooms or other such objects because they remind the owner of a loved one. Belk (1988) mentions heirlooms repeatedly in his discussion of the extended self, and adds “the acquisition of possessions of another person that have been intimately associated with that person” (p. 151) to Goffman’s (1964) list of “six modes of interpersonal contamination.” Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) find that favorite possessions reinforce social relationships, often through their ability to stimulate memories of others. In Grayson and Shulman’s (2000) discussion of “irreplaceable possessions,” (p. 17), they apply Peirce’s semiotic model ([1897] 1940, pp. 98-101) and focus on the “indexical” function of irreplaceable possessions. They conclude that “irreplaceable special possessions are indices because they have a “real, factual, and spatial” connection with the special events and people they represent” (p. 19).

This literature invokes five elements (see figure 1). The first element of the model is the object. The second element is the origin of the meaning of the object. This origin is most often a person, but it can also be an event or a place. The third element is the contamination process by which the object’s meaning is individualized through association with the origin. The fourth element is the consumer. The fifth element is the indexical relationship between the consumer and the object. Our interest is in the consumer’s relationship with the object and with the origin. We are not concerned here with issues such as ownership status.

Objects Represent Relationships with Others

A more complex view of the semiotic process focuses on relationships. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that many people, termed “warm,” value possessions because of the relationships those objects represent. In the consumer behavior literature, Wallendorf & Arnould (1988) established that objects can also represent our relationships with others (“social linkage”). Richins (1994a) found that when informants were asked to think of a possession that was important to them, at least sixteen percent discussed “sentimental objects representing interpersonal ties (e.g., gifts, photos album, family heirlooms)” being outnumbered only by “assets (e.g. house, property, money)” and transportation as the most commonly reported type of valued possessions (p. 509). In Richins’ piece on materialism (1994b), content analysis of special possessions yielded the dimension “representation of interpersonal ties” with sub-categories of “symbolic ties to others, gifts, and symbols of family history” (p. 527). Curasi, Price and Arnold (2004) discuss keepsakes as “indexical symbols, items with an evidentiary function, able to serve as a testament to important life events (Grayson and Shulman 2000), of immediate descendents’ relationships with their deceased kinsfolk (Belk 1990), and provide vehicles for creating, shaping, and sustaining memories (Finch and Mason 2000)” (p. 610). The relationship model becomes a bit more complex (see figure 2). There is a relationship between the origin and the consumer, the origin contaminates and individualizes the object, and the object then serves the consumer as an index of his or her relationship with the origin.

Objects as Iconic Representations of Group Membership

In their study of intergenerational transfers within kin groups, Curasi, Price, and Arnold (2004, p. 619) differentiate between “the corporal indexical associations of irreplaceable individual cherished objects or keepsakes” and “inalienable wealth [which] is not an interpersonal, indexical symbol, as are keepsakes, but rather, in Pierce’s terms, an iconic one.” They go on to explain that “[a]lthough inalienable possessions lack the corporal indexical associations of irreplaceable individual cherished objects or keepsakes, they retain evidentiary associations that make them irrereplaceable.” Thus, for inalienable familial wealth, the relationship between the consumer and the origin is not necessary. The origin individualizes and contaminates the object. The object becomes an iconic representation for the group. The consumer’s relationship with the object then serves as an index for their relationship with the group (see figure 3).

1 We thank Sidney Levy for comments on an earlier draft.
Object Relations: Conceptual Grounding

Kleine, Kleine, and Allen (1995) studied “person-possession relationships” (p. 327) from the perspective of the self. They point out that one “archetypal theme” in the development of the self is “affiliation versus autonomy seeking.” “Affiliation seeking is apparent when possessions reflect connections with others, with one’s heritage or tradition, or with occasions spent with important others or reflect being in touch with or cared for by others” (p. 328). Again, semiotically, this is viewed as indexicality (Grayson and Shulman 2000). Kleine, Kleine and Allen go on to explicate the importance of consumers feeling that an object is “me” or “not me” in determining their attachment to the object. The “me-not me” distinction was previously mentioned by Levy (1963/1999) in his discussion of symbolism and lifestyle.

Fournier (1998) and Ahuvia (2005) establish brands as worthy of relationships and objects as worthy of love (respectively). Fournier points out that brands can become “animated, humanized, or somehow personalized” and that this is one way to “legitimize...
the brand-as-partner.” That is, she first establishes that a brand can represent an “other,” and then argues that this representation makes the brand a legitimate relationship partner. She identifies three processes of animism. The relevant process for our study of ambivalence and indexical objects is when “these brands can become so strongly associated with the past-other that the person’s spirit comes to dwell in the brand and is evoked reliably with each use” (“[a] brand of air freshener that grandmother kept in her bathroom, a floor cleaner that ex-husband always used”) (p. 345). Again, this represents indexicality. Ahuvia (2005) establishes a person’s ability to “love” an object, a term that is in a more limited sense reserved for living things. He concludes that love objects can “serve as indexical mementos of key events or relationships in the life narrative” (p. 179).

Neither Fournier’s or Ahuvia’s informants articulate the ability of an object to be equivalent to a person (instead of indexing one) and to therefore be an appropriate relationship partner as the following informant does:

“This [painting] is my great, great grandfather. I’ve had it since childhood. It’s more than just a portrait–it’s a person!” (Rochbert-Halton 1984, p. 171), as quoted in Belk 1988, p.149).

One could argue that for this informant, the object has moved beyond indexicality to iconic representation in which the object serves as more than a referent but as a veritable illustration or representation of the person (Grayson and Shulman 2000) or the relationship.

Object Relations: Behavior

The literature on the disposition of special possessions (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), and on the creation of families’ inalienable wealth from individuals’ cherished possessions (Curasi, Price, and Arnold 2004) observe how a consumer’s relationship with an object impacts his or her behavior toward it.

Price Arnold & Curasi (2000) examine “older consumers’ disposition of special possessions” and determine that these possessions had meaning as “narrative mnemonic life tokens,” “totems (tobemic symbols of skills and competence),” or “emblems of kinship structure” (p. 187). Notably they do link relationships with the object to disposition behaviors. However, they are examining a donor-object-recipient relationship from the perspective of the donor. We examine the behavior toward the indexical object from the recipient’s perspective.

More relevant to our interest in ambivalent relationships and indexical objects is the Lastovicka and Ferandez study on how “interpersonal relationships influence product disposition” (2005, p. 814). It builds on Kleine, Kleine and Allen’s (1995) work and examines how informants dispose of objects that have a negative valence and are either “never me” or are “extensions of a past-desired self” (2005, p. 815). Similarly, Grayson and Shulman (2000) refer to a “negative case analysis” where “an indexical possession might be devalued (such as its representation of a disliked parent)...” (p.21). It is this sort of negative affect and socially undesirable feeling that encourages consumers to project their consumer-origin or consumer-group relationship onto the consumer-indexical object relationship.

Karen, one of Fournier’s (1996, rev. 1997) “brand-person relationship” informants, provides an example of how consumer behavior toward an indexical object can mirror feelings toward the origin. “Well, we were using the Hellman’s because that was the brand Jim [ex-husband] wanted. He hated the Miracle Whip...I didn’t care much but now that I am alone, we’re back with the Miracle Whip. No more Hellman’s” (p. 15). Curasi, Price, and Arnould (2004) also discuss the behaviors surrounding inalienable wealth as “kratophony” when “caretakers are likely to encase objects in protected environments, subject them to ritual use, and limit who handles them” (p. 617). They mention display, careful packing, and storage. They also discuss the “failure of transmission” (p. 615) and the “stories of objects that should have been but were not kept” (p. 618) that indicate ambivalence.

Projection

Rook (2006) presents an excellent review of the use of projective techniques in marketing. Rook reports that the use of projective techniques in market and consumer behavior research declined dramatically in the 1970’s, but is now enjoying renewed interest. The seminal piece that renewed interest was Sidney Levy’s “Dreams, Fairly Tales, Animals, and Cars” (1985/1999). As Rook points out (p. 5), the use of projective techniques has been carried on mostly by a set of researchers who have been affiliated with Levy and the Marketing Department at Northwestern University at some point in their career (Rook 1988; Heisley and Levy 1991/1999; McGrath, Sherry and Levy 1993/1999; Belk, Ger and Askegaard 1997; Zaltman 1997).

Our data is not about projective techniques, but “projection” done by people in their symbolic life among objects and other people. Our informants use objects that index others or their relationship with others to act out their ambivalent feelings toward those people and/or relationships. The interpretation of the data requires an understanding of the psychological process of projection. Freud (1950) describes projection as a process that occurs in mentally normal persons; “The projection outwards of internal perceptions is a primitive mechanism” (p. 64). Internal perceptions (senses, emotion, cognitions), of which the person may not be even aware, are “ejected ... into the external world, and thus detached from them and pushed on to [something] else” (p. 62). Projection, in which the person is unconscious of the internal perceptions that have been projected to the external world, is more likely to occur when such projection would result in a relief of conflict (p. 92). This serves as a defense function, in which negative or conflict-laden emotion is “displaced” onto an object (p. 61). However, Freud maintains, projection “also occurs when there is no conflict” (p.64).

Projection is a psychological process that has been much studied. As a general phenomenon it involves the transference or displacement of internal or “primary” emotions and cognitions onto secondary objects such as other people, experiences, and physical objects. Derived from psychodynamic study, the concept helps to explicate various behavioral processes of externalization. Harold Lasswell applied psychoanalytic theory to political processes, and referred to the displacement of private affects onto public objects in the political sphere (Baas 1979).

Projection serves to reduce conflict (ambivalence) that is often unconscious so that one tends to assert one response or the other, often denying negative feelings, saying one thing and doing another. Some forms of projection are called “acting out,” to indicate that the behavior is responding unreasonably to situations or objects in expression of inner needs. It was the resonance between our informants’ ambivalence in their relationships and their acting out toward the objects that indexed those relationships that in turn led us to the concept of projection.

METHODOLOGY

Nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted by trained graduate students at a major West Coast business school. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours in length. The interviews were
transcribed verbatim, resulting in hundreds of pages of data. Interviewers and researchers completed bracketing exercises and kept journal notes. All informants discussed the intergenerational transfers they had received. Nine of the informants had also been donors of intergenerational transfers. The sample consisted of 13 women and 6 men. The informants ranged from working class to upper-middle class. Informants were from twenty to eighty years old, represented all marital statuses, and were of Judeo-Christian background (including Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant). They represented different family structures, including families with adoptions, stepchildren, various ages of biological children, and childless adults. Sometimes we interviewed multiple informants from the same family. Data was thickly coded. In this article we highlight three instances of ambivalence, projection, and acting out from the 18 interviews.

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

Similar to Mick and Buhl (1992), Fournier (1996 rev. 1997, 1998) and Ahuvia (2005), we will draw on three particular case studies to illustrate ambivalence, projection, and acting out.

Michael’s Crystal

Michael goes to great lengths to save objects that were from his father, much as he tried to salvage his relationship with his estranged father. Mindy described some ‘heirlooms’ that her husband, Michael, bought at the estate sale conducted when his absentee father died. Of particular concern to Mindy are the crystal glasses that have broken but with which Michael refuses to part. Mindy offers her own interpretation of the meaning behind Michael’s fanaticism about keeping the broken crystal:

**Mindy:** “Also…I wanted to get on tape that heirlooms count extra in these ‘dysfunctional’ families. They don’t have love. He [husband, Michael] is very sensitive about his heirlooms. He bought some [of the heirlooms] from the estate…so they would still be in the family.

[Some of the stuff was moved] from garage to garage, and the stuff was not wrapped correctly. We came across some broken crystal; the wine glasses’ stems were broken. Then when we unpacked the stuff, he says ‘this stuff can be fixed’ and I looked at him, [and said] ‘this cannot be fixed.’ I have to tell you, I am super sensitive, but some of this cannot be fixed. [He told me.] ‘I cannot throw this out; you will have to throw this out.’ These were not glasses to him; it was like throwing out love.

Having no heirlooms I do not understand this, but I do know that his father was not around in his life. His father left when he was five. Never sent him a birthday card, and then when Michael was 20 he went to search for his father, he found him up in L.A. and he made a relationship with his father and his father’s wife Joyce. He forged this relationship. But from ages 5 and up, I mean, we are talking no father, no nurture.

I guess the crystal means a lot more than broken glass. He couldn’t ‘throw it out; I had to throw it out. Some of it we saved [because] he thinks it still can be fixed, [it only has] tiny cracks. He says somebody can file the glass down. I don’t know, eventually he will want it. He loves using stuff from his father and from his father’s father.”

Michael’s father had abandoned Michael at a young age. Upon his father’s death, Michael bought the crystal glasses to keep them from leaving the family, much as he had tried to keep his father in the family. Even when the crystal breaks, much like the family was broken; Michael tries to save it, just as he tried to forge a relationship with his father. Others may not see much use for the box of broken glasses, just as some people might not have thought his father could be of much use to the family after having abandoned Michael. Michael holds hope that the glass can be fixed, just as he held hope that he could fix the relationship with his father, a relationship he worked hard to “forge.” Michael is maintaining his relationship with his father through his hope about the broken glass. This example demonstrates the recipient’s relationship with the object (Michael tried to save the crystal) as a projection of the recipient’s ambivalent feelings about his relationship with the donor (Michael tried to “forge” a relationship with his father).

Sarah’s Bracelet

Perhaps the most powerful instances of projection occurred when informants described negative actions and/or attitudes toward heirlooms that mirrored, though not necessarily consciously, relationships with the donors or recipients. They were often able to verbalize feelings about the relationships with the objects (representing the donors) that they might not have been willing or able to talk about if directly asked about the relationship with the donors.

One’s relationship with heirlooms can reflect the anger, pain and disappointment that people experience in their families. For example, Sarah, an upwardly mobile MBA student, was resentful of her parents’ working class background and their discomfort around finer things. Sarah’s mother kept her heirlooms (beautiful possessions that fit poorly in the working class existence) stored away in a box and, according to Sarah, had “no appreciation whatsoever for beautiful objects or objects of value. Like she doesn’t care. She’d prefer that they didn’t exist around her.” Sarah is an upwardly-mobile, successful career woman. She aspires to those finer things around which her mother felt discomfort.

Striking projection occurs with Sarah’s story about a bracelet she had been given from her family. Sarah is separated from her family by social class and through emotional distance. This distance is reflected in Sarah’s actions toward an intergenerational transfer:

**Sarah:** “Although I don’t consider it an heirloom, I did lose a really beautiful silver bracelet that had been my grandmother’s or my great-grandmother’s. I’m not really sure whose it was to begin with. But it was really, really pretty, and I wore it all the time and I thought it was so awesome, like totally, I always had it on. And when I was in Paris, it fell off. And you know what’s really bizarre? This is really weird. I sort of knew that I had dropped it, I kind of felt it falling off, but I didn’t stop for some reason. Like I’d look at my wrist, and in the back of my mind have the sense that I was losing my bracelet. Anyhow, it fell off. I never saw it again…

“How did I feel? I felt like, ‘Shit, I should have…’ I felt like, three hours later, ‘Oh my God, I really did lose it back there.’ I thought that was really stupid that I sort of felt that I was losing it and didn’t stop to see if it was on my wrist or not. So mostly I felt dumb and stupid because I lost it.”

Sarah was at a point in her life when she was trying to maintain a connection to her family while simultaneously distancing herself from her working class background. She is shamed by her family’s class membership. As she is engaging in travel in Paris, a behavior that will contribute to her continued growth away from her working
class origin, her heirloom bracelet slips off of her wrist. She knows what is happening, just as she knows that her growth away from her family is happening, and she continues to walk down the streets of Paris, while her family literally slips away from her. Sarah’s behavior reflects her ambivalence toward the family that the object represents. We note that Sarah explicitly states that she does not consider this bracelet to have been an heirloom, and that Sarah claims to be unclear about the object’s history or origin. At a deeper level, Sarah’s story about the bracelet allows her to express regret about her loss, but does not set her up for social disapproval for her actions. She would not be able to easily tell the same story about how she did not “look back” while allowing the distance with her family to build. Her relationship with the bracelet serves not only as a mirror of her relationship with her family, but as a vehicle to express emotion, such as regret, in a socially acceptable manner.

**Deloris’ Victrola**

Deloris provided another example of how informants’ relationships with objects reflect their familial disappointment. Deloris was adopted as a baby, but grew up to know her birth mother and her biological sisters, who had been raised by her biological parents. Deloris received only one object from her biological mother, a “tiny Victrola” that had “old fashioned, tiny records.” Her behavior toward that object resonates with her relationship with her biological mother:

*Deloris:* “I sold it [loud squawk]. I wanted to lie to you and say I still had it, but I couldn’t. I sold it, and it broke my heart afterwards.”

*Brent:* “Why did you sell it? You just didn’t feel you had any use for it?”

*Deloris:* “Well, at the time… I had it in one of the garages and we had a garage sale, and someone, a fellow said, ‘Did you have any old things?’ And I said, ‘Oh well, come back to this old garage I have in the back.’ And so he saw that and offered me some money, and I said okay. Never again, mm-mm. I really feel bad about that.”

*Brent:* “And why do you feel bad about it?”

*Deloris:* “Cause it’s cute and it’s antique and you’ll never see another one like that. That was gorgeous. I must’ve been out of my mind when he wanted to buy it. I said okay. But I had so many things around; I wanted to get rid of things. And that’s what happened.”

Similarities between Deloris, the Victrola, and her adoptive experience are striking. The Victrola did not fit well into Deloris’ life at the time (she had put it in storage). She transferred the object to a stranger. She felt remorse afterwards; she even wanted to “lie” about it and exclaimed “it broke my heart afterwards.” Yet, she then distances herself from the object, as the adoption separated Doris from her birth mother. When asked why she feels bad it is because “it’s cute” and “you’ll never see another one like it. That was gorgeous.” These adjectives sound like descriptions of a baby. We also note that Doris focuses on the attributes of the object and does not express remorse that she has lost a symbolic connection to her birth mother. The Victrola was the only object that Deloris received from her birth mother, yet she sold it from her garage to a stranger.

Deloris may be acting out her unresolved feelings of anger and abandonment toward her birth mother with the Victrola. Just as Doris had kept and treasured other objects as heirlooms from other people, her birth mother had kept and raised other children. As with Sarah’s bracelet, the Victrola might have provided Doris with a means to express her emotion toward her birth mother’s actions, the ability to give away something from her birth mother just as her birth mother had given her away. It might be socially awkward for Doris to talk about these feelings about her mother and the adoption, but the possession provides the vehicle for her to tell her story.

Deloris’ behavior with regard to the Victrola reflects the permanent status of her relationship with her biological mother. Sarah’s rejection of her family as she moves socially upward may be temporary—once she becomes comfortable and accepted in her new social position, she may find a way to resolve her current discomfort with her family’s position and re-establish ties.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The genesis of this article is the recognition of our informants’ ambivalence toward certain relationships in their lives and the way this ambivalence manifests in acting out on objects that represent that relationship. This realization turns us toward the literature in consumer behavior on the meaning of goods, particularly where the object’s meaning draws on relationships between consumers. Our data is drawn from our study of intergenerational transfers. The literature on symbolism and the meaning of things (Levy 1963/1999; Levy 1985/1999; Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, and Rochberg-Halton 1981), favorite things (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), special possessions (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Richins 1994b), irreplaceable possessions (Grayson and Shulman 2000), cherished possessions (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004), meaningful possessions (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), loved objects (Ahuvia 2005), and possession attachment (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen) is gleaned for insights. Much of this literature refers to objects that are intergenerational transfers within a kinship structure. We construct three models that represent the literature with regard to the relationship that can develop between a consumer, an object, and others, and the creation of meaning within that relationship structure.

We settle on the semiotic concept of the indexical object as a rich explanation of the relationship we observe between our informants and the objects they discuss in the interviews (Shulman and Grayson 2000). The contamination concept explains the individuation of the object by our informants’ kin (Belk 1988). In order to understand the ambivalence that we observed in our informants’ relationships with their kin and their concurrent acting out on the objects that index those kin, we turn toward the ambivalence (Levy1996/1999) and projection (Rook 1988) literature. Finally, we take the reader through three case study examples of projection and acting out by the informants.

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