Changes in Self and Interpersonal Relationships Over Time: a Study of Important Gifts From Gift-Recipients' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the impact of gift-recipients’ self and identity changes on the meanings of the important gifts that they received a long time ago; and the strategies they employ when dealing with these changes in the context of their “existing on-going” and “disconnected” relationships. This paper addresses the research gap in our understanding of how changes in interpersonal relationships with the gift-givers are incorporated into the changing meanings associated with the gifts over time. Our findings expand upon the existing gift-giving research by examining how old gifts signify different aspects of changes to the self in life transitions within consumers’ identity projects.

INTRODUCTION
This paper examines the impact of changes in gift-recipients’ self and identity on the meanings associated with their important gifts that were often received a long time ago; and the strategies they employ when dealing with these changes in the context of their “existing on-going” and “disconnected” relationships. We aim to address the research gap in our understanding of the impact which changes in self and interpersonal relationships with the gift-givers has on the meanings associated with the original gifts over time.

How people interpret, and often give new meanings to, their gifts as their possessions gain in importance over time has not been explored in earlier consumer research. Most gift-giving research focuses on the actual gift-giving process from the perspectives of the givers, recipients, or even of a third person in the decision making process of buying a gift. Earlier research has concentrated on the process of searching for a gift, purchasing a gift, choosing the right place or the right time to give a gift, the reaction of recipients when receiving a gift; and how a third person often influences the decision of a giver in purchasing a gift (Joy, 2001, Curasi, 1999, Belk and Coon, 1993, Otnes, Lowrey and Kim, 1993, Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1992, Lowrey, Otnes and Ruth, 2004, Sherry 1983).

However, Josselson, Lieblich and McAdam (2007) commented that “relationships are central, from the very beginning of and throughout life, to the constitution and expression of the self” (p. 3). Through their narratives about the important gifts that they have received, informants reveal how their selves are maintained, modified or changed in two contrasting relationships, i.e. the “existing on-going” and “disconnected” relationships, with the gift-givers. Four informants’ narratives about their important gifts are used to explore how the sense of self, and the associated interpretation and meanings of important gifts, change and co-evolve over time.

Earlier research used six relational meanings of gifts to examine the creation and maintenance of relationships from the perspective of gift-recipients (Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999). However, how gift-recipients’ identities, and the meanings of their important gifts, change over time has not been explored. Building upon Ruth et al.’s (1999) study of “how relational meanings are created through gifts” (p. 385), this paper focuses firstly, on the interpersonal relationships between gift-givers and gift-recipients; and secondly on the gifts that recipients received a long time ago and whose meanings have evolved over time. The emotionally and symbolically-laden meanings of gifts may change over the life course (Belk, 1988, Solomon, 1983) so that gift recipients reinterpret the meanings of these gifts. These gifts often become special possessions for recipients, bearing witness to their different relationship life stages such as dating, getting married, divorced, or losing their loved ones. Each relationship transition offers an opportunity for recipients to redefine and renegotiate their identities (McAlexander, 1991). Throughout these trajectories of different transitions, some recipients maintained and strengthened their relationships with the gift-givers, whereas some recipients struggled or even ended their relationships with the gift-givers due to relationship breakdowns, personal disputes or death. These relationship changes lead to self-modification and self-change.

In this exploratory study of self-change and self-continuity, we collected and analysed consumers’ narratives so that we could access discourses around the self in different settings. Selves and identities are embedded in discourse in the format and construction of stories (Georgakopoulou, 2002). We begin by reviewing the literature on gift-giving, possessions and the use of narratives; before outlining the research design and the method of narrative analysis; then we present the stories from four informants about how they modified their self and identity, and re-interpreted their relationships with their important gifts. We conclude by discussing the different strategies informants employ when dealing with these changes.

GIFT-GIVING
Gift-giving has been studied for decades in anthropology (i.e. the economic reciprocity exchange), sociology (i.e. the social exchange) and psychology (i.e. the motivation of reciprocity exchange) (Mauss 1954, Homans 1961, Schwartz 1967). In marketing, Sherry (1983) proposed a three-stage framework of the gift-giving process involving the gestation stage (i.e. searching for, choosing and buying a gift), then the presentation stage (i.e. the time and place of the actual exchange) to the final stage of reformulation (i.e. realignment and reformulation of the relationships between the gift-giver and gift-recipient). Building upon the economic and social reciprocity exchange of gift-giving, Belk and Coon (1993) identified gift-giving among dating couples as agapic love gift-giving and suggested that the reciprocal exchange is not a requisite feature of gift-giving between lovers. Similar findings were found in studies of romantic couples in Minowa and Gould (1999) and Joy (2001).

Most gift-giving research focuses on the actual gift-giving process and activities (1) from the perspectives of the gift-givers (Joy, 2001, Minowa and Gould, 1999, Curasi, 1999, Belk and Coon, 1993, Otnes et al., 1993) in terms of the decision making process involved in buying a gift (i.e. searching for a gift, purchasing a gift, choosing the right place or a right time to give the gift); (2) from the perspectives of the gift-recipients (Minowa and Gould, 1999, Ruth et al., 1999, Fischer and Arnold, 1990, McGrath, 1989) (i.e. the reaction of recipients when receiving a gift and how they evaluate their relationships after the gift-receiving experiences); (3) the disposition of the gift (Sherry et al., 1992); or (4) how a third person influences people’s Christmas gift purchasing (Lowrey et al., 2004). Furthermore, gifts carry many emotional and symbolic meanings including love (Belk and Coon 1993, Fischer and Arnold 1990) and sadness (Mick and Demoss, 1990).
Consistent with the nature of possessions, meanings of gifts will change and evolve according to the recipients’ life experiences and social contexts. Andersen (1993) suggested that a relationship trajectory exists between the giver and recipient and consists of the interpretation of the relationship in the past, the current state of the relationship, and the possible relationship in the future. For our study, we are interested in how the relationship trajectory is reflected in and embodied by the different meanings which are invested in the gifts that have become important possessions, over time.

POSESSIONS AND THE SELF

Belk (1988) argued that people extend the concept of self through their possessions, i.e. products, places, other people and pets. “Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities” (p. 139). There are five stages of role-identity development throughout the identity project life cycle, i.e. pre-socialization, discovery, construction, maintenance and disposition (Kleine and Kleine, 2000). People reveal different aspects of their self and identity by retelling stories of possessions. Although aspects of the self are viewed and emphasized in various ways in different cultures, “the fact that these conceptions of self are expressed to some degree through objects seems to be universal” (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988: 532). Furthermore, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) commented that “things tell us who we are, not in words but by embodying our intentions. In our everyday traffic of existence, we can also learn about ourselves from objects, almost as much as from people” (p. 91).

In terms of temporality and possessions, items that people acquired in the past carry meanings in the present time and may anticipate meanings in the future (Kleine and Baker, 2004). The temporal features of attachments are consistent with narratives. In narratives, people retell and reorganise their past events and provide evaluations and add new meanings to them in the present time and sometimes also predict possible futures. Therefore, people’s selves are revealed through stories about their attachments. As Kleine et al. stated (1995: 327), “a special possession could facilitate self-continuity by connecting a person with a desirable past self (e.g. memories), a present self (me now), or a future self (who I am becoming)”.

NARRATIVES

“People live storied lives” (Creswell, 2005: 87). People are natural storytellers who share their stories with friends or colleagues, on a daily basis. “Relationships require narrative to evoke the empathy and multilayered attention necessary for one person to have some sense of the nature of someone else’s relational experience” (Josselson et al., 2007: 4). One of the advantages of narratives is that “they organise life, i.e. social relations, interpretations of the past, present and future” (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004: xi). From their past experience, narrators learn and make who they are at present and who they might want to be in the future. It is clear that narratives provide a sense of self as continuous through time. Furthermore, possessions and narratives are closely linked together. Possessions have a function in helping people to narrate their stories as Kleine et al. (1995) emphasize “possessions to which there is attachment help narrate a person’s life story; they reflect “my life” (p. 327).

RESEARCH METHOD: NARRATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

In the present study, informants were asked to share stories about their gifts as possessions that were special, meaningful and important to them. Their selves and identities are embedded in their stories as Georgakopoulou (2002) says that “if selves and identities are constituted in discourse, they are necessarily constructed in stories” (p. 428). The snowball technique was used to identify twenty informants (ten males, ten females).

The informants were young professionals aged between 29 and 37; either single or married. Semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted in Hong Kong and lasted on average one hour. Some guided questions were used in order to stimulate a discussion. However, interviews were not strictly constructed and this was in line with Wagner and Wodak’s (2006) method of narrative interview. Rather, the flow of topics varied depending on their stories. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The transcripts were read a number of times in order to achieve familiarity with the material. Then, a three-dimensional narrative structural analysis (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) was applied in order to examine how narrators told their stories under the dimension of interaction (i.e. their belief and values on the personal level and interactions with other people on the social level), the dimension of temporality (i.e. how the past event or experience leads to the present self and will possibly influence informants’ future decisions), and the dimension of situations (i.e. time and context). Finally, the story fragments from each narrator were linked up in order to compose a coherent “story line” for each person (Fournier and Mick, 1999, Tagg, 1985).

In this study of gift-recipients’ interpretation of the meanings of their important gifts, informants narrated stories about the gifts that had become important possessions. They described gifts that they had owned between 5 and 25 years. We analysed and examined how these narrators told their stories about different aspects of their selves in terms of their relationships with their gift-givers. We chose four informants’ narratives for this paper which illustrate the central emergent themes of the “existing on-going” and “disconnected” relationships.

FINDINGS

Data analysis yielded a number of themes that revealed gift-recipients’ interpretation of their selves and interpersonal relationships with the gift-givers, and changes in the meanings of their important gifts. Themes will be examined under two dimensions, i.e. “the disconnected relationships” and “the on-going relationships” between the gift-givers and the gift-recipients. Strategies of how informants maintain, modify or negotiate their self and the relationships with their gift-givers will be covered in the discussion section.

DIMENSION: DISCONNECTED RELATIONSHIPS

Ada: Her disconnected relationships with her ex-husband and her deceased father

Ada told five stories about gifts which represented important possessions for her. Four stories related to her ex-husband and one story was about her father who had died 6 years before. Ada is a 39-year old fashion boutique owner who has always wanted to improve her quality of life by challenging herself at different stages of her life. She first narrated her love story in a temporal sequence starting from how Ada and John, her ex-husband, had met in high school and how she had received her first gift from him when dating.

1The purpose of the snowballing technique is to identify and accumulate informants as each located informant recommends other people to researchers (Babbie 1996, Creswell 1998).
Ada: “We were dating at that time… It (the watch) was so popular at that time to have vintage style watches. He noticed that I like one of the watches there. He secretly bought it and gave it to me at Christmas. He was very fond of me at that time.

After they completed their GCSEs (a high school public exam), John, her ex-husband, was sent to study at university in the US. That was the first time they were apart. Before he left Hong Kong, he bought a Titus watch from their special love series and had it engraved with the words “Everlasting Love” on the back of the watch for Ada as a reassurance of his love for her. Ada narrated how they were apart and how happy and sweet she felt when she received it. However, all of the sudden, she came back to the reality from her narrative and realized that the relationship was over. “Forget it. It’s over. It was the past!”

Ada: “The second watch is from him. When he studied aboard, he bought me a Titus. It was the first time we were separated. I didn’t wanna let him go. Therefore, he bought me that watch. It was that special love series with the slogan of “It doesn’t matter whether we cannot be together forever, the important thing is we have each other at this moment…” (pause) Forget it. It’s over. It was the past!”

Ignoring her family’s objections, Ada went to the U.S. in order to be with John. They had a happy time together in the US. Both of them were students and enjoyed their lives without their parents. John always wanted to surprise Ada by buying or getting something special for her. He secretly asked his friend to buy a “Big Mouth Boy” Japanese cartoon watch, i.e. Ada’s favourite cartoon character, for her. The watch was not available in Hong Kong. Therefore, John asked his friend to buy it from Japan.

Ada: “‘Little Big Mouth’ watch. We were in the US at that moment. He knew that I loved that cartoon character. He asked somebody who was on the way to Hong Kong… bought it… via Japan… came back to the US.”

They got married in Canada and then John returned to Hong Kong where he worked as an architect. Ada stayed in San Francisco and tried to complete her studies. Separation was not easy. Ada decided to quit her studies and went back to Hong Kong. Once again, John wanted to show his affection by using his first salary to buy her an expensive watch, i.e. Rolex.

Ada: “We were separated for four months (after the wedding). He saved it for four months. When we met again at the airport, he gave it to me. It was a surprise again. This is my first luxury watch and still the only luxury watch. I think the current price of that model is about HKD 30,000 something.”

Sadly the marriage ended after 8 years. It was John who made the decision to end the relationship. Ada was in shock and could not believe that John was going to leave her. Looking back, Ada realized that she had not shown enough appreciation and had taken John for granted. She had not cherished the times that she had with him. When looking at all the gifts she received from him, she is more touched than before.

Ada: “Currently, I am more touched. I didn’t cherish them at that time. When I looked back, I realized nobody would treat me that nice. Not any more… Forget it. Don’t talk about it. (Note: She started to cry)"

Ada is still struggling to redefine her sense of self and identity after her divorce. She could not correct the mistakes she had made in the past and that had destroyed her marriage. However, she wanted to move on from this disconnected relationship. During her narration Ada, from time to time, re-emphasized how the interviewer and herself should address John as “her EX-HUSBAND”. She consciously kept trying to remind herself of her current status of being “divorced”.

The other important possession that she described was a gift from her father who had died 6 years before. She received a watch from her father when she was 15 years old. It was a ritual in her family that all the children received a watch from their father when they reached 15 years old. When Ada received the watch, she felt like she had reached the stage of adulthood. While narrating the story about the watch that she received from her father, she came to a realization that she shared some similarity with her father, being an authoritative figure in her own marriage. She believed that was the reason why her marriage had broken down.

Ada: “I got this watch from my dad when I was 15 years old. The brand was popular at that time… even advertising on TV. It was the first watch I wore at school. Dad gave us a watch when we reached 15. It’s like when you are an adult, you got a watch coz at that time watches were quite precious. …We had some good times and bad times. He was very authoritative and my mum is always gentle and listens to him. I guess I picked my dad’s role and became “my dad” in my own marriage. I destroyed my own marriage. Anyway, the feeling not having my dad around is now different. I could console myself that it’s gone. But when it comes to details, say see some elderly… that reminds me of my dad. Then I realized I still miss him.”

Ada received those gifts more than 20 years ago. The original feelings of receiving those gifts were sweet, touching, full of surprises and feeling like a grown-up. As time went by, Ada faced different life transitions, from dating, getting married, experiencing a divorce and the death of her father. The attachments represented by those gifts intensified and increased as Ada offered new interpretations and meanings for her important gifts.

Ping: his disconnected relationship with his mother, the lost loved one

Ping’s mother was his role model. Mrs Wong was hard working and full of love and care. In Ping’s eyes, his mother was “invincible”. Mrs Wong could cook delicious Chinese food, knit and mend old clothes in order to save money as well as taking care of the church where she worked as a janitor at the same time. Although his mother had died 9 years ago, he still missed her a lot. He wanted to hold on to the gifts that she had given to him so that he could feel her presence. As time has gone by, he has gradually tried to let go of some of the gifts as a sign of learning how to live without his mother’s presence.

Ping’s mother was good at knitting. She had knitted a lot of sweaters for him when he was young. He did not cherish them at that time. Once his mother passed away, he realized how important it was to keep these sweaters in order to feel her presence. He only has one sweater left now, and it is so precious that he does not dare to wear it as he said “you will never have a second one”.

Ping: “A sweater that my mother knitted for me. I have only one left. I cherish it so much that I do not dare to wear it. I used to have quite many sweaters knit by her. I didn’t cherish
them at that time. I have one left and I don’t want to wear it.… I might take it out and have a look… coz no more… you will never have a second one. I quite cherish it.”

His family was not that well-off. His mother always tried to mend clothes and blankets instead of buying new ones for him in order to save money. Ping viewed these as part of the gifts that he had received from his mother. It is a good image of her virtue that he always remembered. In his opinion, Mrs Wong sacrificed herself for the family, especially for her children. He used to have a blanket that Mrs Wong had mended, darning the edges in order to repair it. Ping kept it for several years. As time went by, he started to find the courage to look at some of the gifts that reminded him of his mother. It has been 9 years and he is still learning how to let go of some of the emotion by disposing of some of his precious items.

Ping: “I think I can let go. For example, I just threw a worn out blanket away today. The reason I kept it for a while is that my mum mended the edges of the blanket. I didn’t want to throw it away. But I realized I have to let go something.

DIMENSION: EXISTING ON-GOING RELATIONSHIPS

Stephanie: Her on-going relationships with her sister and husband

Stephanie narrated 6 stories about her important possessions, half of which she had received as gifts from her sister and her husband. Stephanie is very close to her sister, Jenny. The age gap between them is so small that they played, cried and fought for toys or clothes when they were young. Jenny sometimes can be quite competitive. For example, Stephanie wanted to be a flight attendant. Immediately, Jenny applied for the same position in a different airline company. Stephanie received a watch from her sister as a birthday gift almost 10 years ago. It was the first time that Jenny had left Hong Kong and lived in another place for a long time. When she was not around, Stephanie missed her greatly. Jenny sent a funny watch to Stephanie as her birthday present during the time she was in the US. Stephanie appreciated the watch because of her relationship with her sister. She has worn the watch for almost ten years.

“Another one (watch)…my sister sent it to me from the US. She and I are very close…sometimes quite competitive…like I decided to become a flight attendant and she immediately did the same. Anyway, I missed her when she was not around. My sister was there with her husband for more than a year. She sent the watch to me as my birthday present. I like it VERY much and have been wearing it for many years…almost ten years.”

Stephanie and Alex got engaged in 2001. Alex proposed in a traditional way with a bunch of flowers, a diamond ring and a surprise dinner. Stephanie personally does not particularly like diamond rings. She had bought one for herself in the past. But she emphasized that the ring from Alex is different from any other ring. It is her engagement ring with a heart-shape diamond on it. It is a sign of Alex’s promise and love for her. Although the diamond is not that big, it has a significant meaning for her that makes her happy. She cherishes it so much that she does not wear it every day. She only wears it when attending “somebody’s wedding” to signify her marital status.

“I am not a big fan of diamond rings. The size of the diamond is not important to me coz I don’t like it too big. The big diamonds don’t suit my image. The way I dress… don’t match. I like the one I got from Alex… small and a heart shape… because it is meaningful and I like the heart shape diamond. I bought a diamond ring for myself before. But when I go out, I wear Alex’s diamond ring not mine. I like that one. But I don’t wear it every day. Only when I attend to somebody’s weddings. …I like it (the ring). It makes me happy. It is meaningful and beautiful.”

Stephanie also received a diamond pendant cross from Alex on her baptism before they were married. It has a symbolic meaning because now she is a Christian with a cross around her neck. In addition to the symbolic meaning of the necklace, there were additional lived experiences associated with the pendant because she accidentally dropped the pendant down the sink. The experience taught her that it is always better to solve problems together rather than alone and she appreciated Alex’s support and help. The pendant cross carries not only the original meaning of celebrating her baptism, but also an additional experientially-derived meaning that they will always share.

“Alex gave it to me on my baptism… the day to celebrate that I became Christian. I dropped in the sink and took me the whole night to fetch it… Now when I think about it, it is still quite sad coz it took me the whole night and I felt really down. …I did not want to wake up Alex. I thought he could not help me. I thought men are careless. How wrong and silly I was?? At the end, we had to solve the problem together and got the pendant out of the tube of drain of the sink. Alex did it with some “Blue tap”… I wouldn’t get it out by myself. It was him who did it for me. That was an experience that we learned… to try to solve problems together”

Peter: His existing on-going relationships with his father and wife

Peter was born into a complex family. His father had two wives, or rather an official wife and an unofficial wife (a mistress), more typical of pre-war China. His father owned factories in Hong Kong and China which exported electronic parts to the US. His family was very well-off. Peter is the mistress’ son, meaning that he was not recognised by the family. Although Peter has a complicated background, he had a happy childhood with his mother and sister. His father came to visit them as often as he could in order to provide a fatherly figure to him. Peter and his sister went to live with his father’s family, consisting of a elder half brother and half sister, when he was about 12 years old.

Peter has a close relationship with his father although his father did not live with him when he was child. He respects his father as an entrepreneur setting up factories on his own. Peter believes his father had a reason to do what he did in the past and does not feel any resentment towards him. Peter received a watch from his father as a sign of reaching adulthood. The watch is important and memorable for Peter because his father gave it to him.

Peter: “Another one I got is from my dad… can’t remember the brand… it got a vintage feel of it. My dad likes watches as well… He just gave it to me to wear. He thought I had grown up as an adult and it was time to give me one. Therefore, he passed the watch to me. For me, this is a memorable item. My dad gave it to me.”

His father used to own a lot of cars when the businesses were doing very well. However all the companies were closed down, following a financial crisis. Peter’s father sold almost everything he
owned in order to pay off his debt. The only thing his father kept for himself, and later passed it on to Peter, was the licence plate BD 2822. His father bought this licence plate when he started his business. The number “2822” has a meaning in Chinese that “2” sounds like the word “easy” in Chinese and “8” sounds like “rich” in Chinese. The licence plate has two symbolic meanings for Peter. First of all, it is a precious item marking his father’s success in the past. His father passed this precious item onto him. Peter wants to continue the spirit of the family legacy to the next generation. The second symbolic meaning of the licence plate is a special link between Peter and his father. Peter admires his father who is a very traditional Chinese father who does not show much of his emotion through words but through objects that he passed on to his son. His father did not give the licence plate to any of his other children, not even to Peter’s older half-brother who is traditionally the heir in the family. The recognition and love from his father meant a great deal to Peter.

Peter: An item . . . hmm . . . a licence no. of BD 2822. Dad passed it on to me. He used to have this licence no. to his car. The number is very special. For me, first the Chinese pronunciation of 2822. Also, he gave it to me. If I could pass it on to the next generation, that would be great. This gives me . . . a family . . . it doesn’t worth any money . . . but it is like a family legacy you pass it on to the next generation. It is not the jewel of the family. But it has a special link between me and my dad . . . keeping it. I hope I could pass it on to the next generation some day.

Bonnie, his then-girlfriend and now-wife, bought a lover watch set of Agnes B for Peter during the time they were dating because she wanted to have some proper watches for both of them to wear when attending formal occasions, e.g. Chinese banquets. Peter likes the watch because it is different from the watch he wears at work as a PE teacher. As he said, “it is a proper watch”. Also, it is a lover set of watches that they can use to show their commitment to each other as a couple by wearing them together.

Peter: “Bonnie bought me a watch, Agnes B lover watches. No...no.. no. . . it was a lover set. It was the first love set watches we had but were stolen last year. We always have sporty watches because of our work (PE teachers)... like that kind of digital... Casio. . . Bonnie wanted to buy watches that we can wear them together in different formal occasions like Chinese banquets. I like it... she had the same watch and I had the same . . . quite nice . . . as a couple.”

From dating to getting married, Bonnie and Peter have built up their dreams together through different transitions. Their love has grown strong so that the this gift has acquired additional meanings. Peter had a calling/vision that he wanted to study theology and to dedicate himself to his church. After serious discussions with Bonnie and attending different retreat camps, he made up his mind to give up his job as a PE teacher and to enrol himself in the Christian ministry and study theology for three years. Although the financial burden fell on Bonnie’s shoulders, she did not complain about helping Peter fulfil his dream. In fact, she was very proud of her husband’s decision. As Peter said, “I really have to thank Bonnie for her unconditional support and patience. The family . . . that is the most important thing.”

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings expand upon the existing gift-giving research to illustrate how old and established gifts can signify the evolution of interpersonal relationships over time, and these meanings co-evolve with self-change and self-continuity. Different strategies are adopted in order to manage the changes within the “disconnected” and “existing on-going” relationships.

In the disconnected relationships our story-tellers often found themselves facing a dialectic tension in their narratives. They were often caught between the stages of identity disposition, identity discovery and identity construction within role identity development (Kleine and Kleine, 2000). The negotiation process of letting go of some things whilst keeping hold of others amongst their meaningful possessions often helped them cope with loss and to adjust to change in this liminal phase of life transitions. “Possessions bring past meanings into the present and maintain present meanings. Possessions also help them project themselves in to the future, even beyond death” (Kleine and Baker, 2004: p. 9). Due to the fact that they will not or cannot have any further contact with the gift givers, they are in the process of self-reconstruction, moving from disposing of their past identity (e.g. Ada as a married person) to acquiring a new identity (e.g. Ada becoming a divorcee), giving new emotional and symbolic meanings to their gifts that they had received from their gift-givers. In Ada’s case, she did not want a divorce. In general, people who did not take the initiative in the divorce proceedings tend to hold on to possessions or gifts that are related to their partners as if they are still holding on to the relationships (McAlexander, 1991). The strategy of holding on to her gifts implies that she is still in the liminal phase; that she is in “a limbo between the past state (i.e. a married woman) to the current one (i.e. a divorcee)” (Schouten, 1991: 421). Ada is in the process of identity reconstruction, and her narrative captures the dialectic tension experienced as a divorcee within her identity role project. “Attachment itself, and the meanings of attachment possessions, tend to be dynamic in order to manage the relentless conflict between desiring self-continuity and needing self-change” (Kleine and Baker, 2004: p. 5).

In the disconnected relationships with the gift-giver caused by death, Ada and Ping used a strategy of “re-membering” their lost loved ones on a different level (Myerhoff, 1982). “The parent may be dead, but the relationship did not die” (Silverman and Nickman, 1993: 315). Over time, people accept the reality of the loss and learn how to find a way to include the lost loved ones in their life (Nasim, 2007). Ada had both good and bad times with her father in the past. But she focused on the good times, e.g. a gift that she received from him as a sign of reaching adulthood embodied the best image of their relationship and meant that “I could console myself that it’s gone.” Similar to Ada, Ping tried to find a strategy to balance the dialectic tension in his narrative between “holding on” and “letting go”. The sacredness that Ping invests in his sweater reflects the importance of his mother’s status in his heart (Belk et al., 1989). His disposition of the blanket is a step that he takes in order to try and redefine his relationship with his mother. Both Ada and Ping have kept their relationships with their deceased parent alive at another level in order to help their own self-change within their life transitions (Nasim, 2007).

The strategy for Stephanie and Peter in their “existing on-going” relationships with the gift-givers was to maintain and cultivate a promising future together. In the case of existing on-going relationships with the gift-givers, the symbolic and emotional meanings and values of the possessions were enhanced through interactions (i.e. wearing or using the important gifts on different occasions) (Richins, 1994). In contrast to the role-identity develop-

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2Myerhoff (1982) suggested the term re-membering to describe how people redefine their relationships with the deceased and include them in their lives.
ment in the “disconnected” relationships, informants in the “existing on-going” relationships sought identity maintenance in their role-identity development (Kleine et al. 2005). Stephanie and Peter focus not only on the past and the present but also look forward to strengthening and cultivating a promising future together.

Peter was a mistress’ son and was not recognised in the family when he was a child. Having moved in to live with his father’s family when he was a teenager, he was eager to be accepted as part of the family. Receiving a watch from his father when he reached adulthood, and a family licence plate as a sign of carrying on the “family legacy”, signified his recognition by his father and the family. These gifts represented the family’s inalienable wealth and carried significant symbolic meanings for Peter (Curasi et al., 2004). Stephanie, in her turn, had been wearing the watch that her sister had given her, for more than 10 years. The watch “evokes richly textured webs of her personal memories” and her relationship with her sister (Belk 1991).

In an interpersonal romantic relationship, a person’s self tends to overlap with his/her partners (Aron et al., 1992). Peter received a watch from Bonnie when they were dating. The watches are symbols of their love. They wear them in public as a signal to other people that they are united, illustrating continuity, affiliation and love. Similar to Peter, Stephanie wore her engagement ring to indicate that she had been engaged in the past and was now married, and working on building a solid foundation for her relationship with her husband (Kleine and Baker, 2004). In terms of her story about her pendant diamond cross, the pendant carries not only the original meaning of celebrating her baptism, but also an additional layer of new meaning that was created by the shared memories of Stephanie and Alex of losing and then regaining the cross.

Collecting and analyzing consumer narratives allowed a deeper understanding in terms of how informants view themselves and their relationships with their loved ones through their important gifts, i.e. the possession value of objects. This captures temporal notions of the self-change/continuity as possessions provide “symbolic benefits delivering self-change/continuity value” (Kleine and Baker, 2004: 25). These informants shared their innermost feelings about their possessions and revealed who they were, how they became who they are, and sometimes also who they want to be in the future, which meant that different views of the self started to emerge around the axes of continuity and change, and different views of the strategies used to manage ongoing relationships with gift-givers also emerged, whether the gift-givers were living or dead.

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