Inalienable Wealth and Trauma Resolution: an Explanation of Genealogy Consumption
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This study explores how inalienable wealth is created through genealogy. The motivation for this wealth existed in personal and inter-generational traumas, including absent father, death during child birth, loss of aristocratic titles and lands, and slavery.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Inalienable wealth has been defined as possessions that are intentionally kept within a close group, with previous research focussing on certain possessions taking on behavioural dynamics of guardianship or temporal orientation (Curasi, Price and Arnould, 2004; Price, Arnould and Curasi, 2000). These perspectives, however, have focussed on possessions becoming a contested area arising from issues of ownership and wanting to maintain and perpetuate cherished meanings associated with products. However, this perspective is from a living individual wanting and willingly seeking out ways to engage with later generations by perpetuating these memories. This paper aims to understand how the living create inalienable wealth by seeking out possessions and information from previous ancestral generations (including photographs, sharing ancestral data, visiting places and historical documents), even though there may be no living, emotional, linkage between the generations concerned. We will argue that peoples motivations to undertake genealogical consumption reflects not only cultural and societal changes but a fundamental need by individuals to use genealogy consumption for, conscious and unconscious, resolution of personal and inter-generational traumas.

The antecedents of genealogical consumption were explored using a Consumer Culture Theory perspective that focussed on the individual’s self-identity and their cultural context. Western culture has been identified to varying levels with individualism, referring to a cultural system that emphasises the rights of the individual over the community and attributed to declining levels of family orientation and, from a British context, declining levels of religiousness (Halman, 1996; *, *, 2005). Previously individualism has been attributed to materialism, reflecting wider dissatisfaction within an individual’s life (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; La Barbera and Gurhan, 1997). However, the failure of possessions, and hence materialism, to lead to personal happiness may be reflective of a deeper, personal, crisis, within the individual. This crisis, we argue, motivates the consumer to seek resolution through alternative possession meanings, i.e. obtaining inalienable wealth through genealogy. The motivation for these behaviours we argue can be identified with personal and inter-generational trauma, i.e. inherited from previous generations.

Inter-generational trauma can be identified from two perspectives. First, the psycho-analytical perspective argues that trauma is inherited by the child from the parent preventing the child from developing their own, unique, personality, consequently, resulting in inter-generational trauma (Abraham and Torok, 1994; Praeger, 2003). The second distinct research field draws upon sociological studies, which argues that each generation occupies a particular social location, allowing for social experiences to be refracted and made meaningful. However, failure by the individual to identify with and belong to that period of time ensures that they remain traumatized and instead focused on historical experiences and events (Dilthey, 1924; Mannheim, 1928/1972).

The methodology involved a four year immersion into the genealogical consumption arena, covering the period January 2006 to January 2010, including access to a variety of genealogical data and consumption arenas. The sampling procedure employed was theoretical, relational and discriminative. To achieve this, only participants who were related to the researcher were interviewed, regardless of whether this connection was within a wider extended family or from several generations back. This was assessed by participants having a *, * surname appear within their respective genealogical lineage. All the participants were approached via a genealogy website producing a sample group consisting of eight people, aged from 48 to 67, living in Australia or Britain. Participants were interviewed with open-ended, grand tour style questions exploring various inter-related themes including: the participants’ reasons for their genealogy research, how they engaged with historical records (including their personal meaning for the participant) and their immediate family histories. During the interview process the author probed participants to explore in greater depth personal experiences, family myths, stories and traumas, opinions and thoughts and how this was reflected in their genealogy research.

The interviews were then transcribed, analyzed to identify emergent themes. Finally to ensure reliability and validity the findings were reviewed and discussed with the help of two academic reviewers—one a consumer behaviorist, the other a qualified psychotherapist.

The findings supported the notion that participants were using genealogy as a means of creating a sense of identity in response to their irreligious, lack of materialistic traits and need to seek out a community and wider sense of family. Genealogy offered then an opportunity to substantiate and maintain a sense of identity through creating inalienable wealth through genealogical consumption. Participants discussed how they collected, shared and exchanged ancestral documents, photographs, and stories, often leading to meetings and trips to shared ancestral locations. These engagements offered an opportunity for a reconstruction of a sense of family and inter-connectedness. The need to seek information from the past is reflective of the sociological perspective of inter-generational trauma.

From a psycho-analytical perspective, only one participant did not discuss a personal and/or inter-generational trauma that had motivated them to undertake genealogical research. Personal traumas ranged from loss of a father, unwanted divorce or a wider need to understand their world, whilst inter-generational trauma included stories of slavery, death in child birth and loss of aristocratic titles and lands. Participants by seeking out ancestral documents, stories and myths provided an opportunity to explore, understand and resolve the cultural, economic and social aspects of their inherited trauma.

Genealogy then presented opportunities for participants to seek out and develop the cues, materials and prompts for the individual to recall particular events to the extent of creating memories that they may never have experienced. These memories were then actively shared and sought out amongst participants and genealogical communities providing a needed and sought affirmation of their self-identity. Commemorative and other related memory symbols (such as documents and photographs) become then symbolic to the participants because of their ability to elicit a reaction from individuals; a reaction identifiable with and developing further previous work into inalienable wealth by Curasi, Price and Arnould’s (2004) and Price, Arnould and Curasi’s (2000). The genealogical community based upon a shared ancestor offered opportunities for intimacy, creating social networks and resolution of personal and inherited traumas but also a means to achieve autonomy and independence.

REFERENCES


