

Sentimental Objects, Meaningful Connections: Designing a Narrative-Based Framework to Support the Passing of Significant Personal Belongings into New Hands

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Designing a Narrative-Based Framework to
Support the Passing of Significant Personal
Belongings into New Hands.

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Canada’s population is aging: there are now more people in this country over the age of 65 than under the age of 15. This older population is looking to the future and seeking more freedom and less home maintenance; alternately, they are unable to stay in their homes due to changed physical, mental, or financial concerns, that entail moving out of necessity, even unwillingly. In the process, many baby boomers are downsizing, decluttering their existing homes where they raised their families and accumulated a lifetime of goods, including significant personal belongings that are markers of personal identity. This process of downsizing and purging leads to emotional roadblocks when these individuals are confronted with these sentimental, personal belongings: items that they would either like to pass on to the next generation or dispose of, but find doing so extremely difficult. This study examines this phenomenon both from the perspective of older persons who have recently downsized and from individuals of any age who have recently moved and have been faced with the reality of parting with significant belongings.

This study seeks to answer the questions: what is the connection between personal objects and memory? How might we use storytelling to access, preserve, and share these stored memories, ultimately working toward the development of a framework that would allow for these stories to be shared, ensuring that the object retains its value while passing it onto someone else, in a way that minimizes a sense of pain or loss on the part of the original owner?

Keywords: personal objects, belongings, memory, downsizing, organization, sentimentality, storytelling

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

For the past three years, I have kept a collection of rocks (Appendix A) just inside my front door, in a bowl that used to belong to my grandmother. I don't remember where I got some of the rocks, and those whose origins that I do remember aren't from an especially significant or special place. What has imbued them with meaning/significance for me, is the fact that I have collected them, gathered them together. These rocks have absorbed the everyday comings and goings of my home and those who live in it. They have borne silent witness to all the emotions, good and bad, that come with living independently; they will always remind me of the first place that was truly mine. These seemingly worthless objects have become imbued with a significant level of attachment beyond their material worth, or even any specific narrative attached to my collecting them. From being random things that I happened to pick up over the course of a number of years, they have become significant personal belongings, parting with them now would, I am sure, cause me pain and discomfort.

Anthropologists, historians of material culture, archaeologists, sociologists and psychologists have all acknowledged the significance of so-called 'everyday objects' to the formation of personal identity and culture. These objects are what we choose to surround ourselves with daily; they inform how we think about ourselves and others, and they help us to navigate the world. In the words of archaeologists Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "Objects do not just provide a stage setting to human action; they are integral to it" (Gosden and Marshall, 1999, p. 169). Objects do not merely exist in the same space as humans: they actively impact human life and the choices that humans make.

Of course, not all objects are significant in the same way; in this project, I will be focusing on belongings whose personal significance to their owners marks them as holders of memory, meaning, and sentimental value – and this despite the fact that others (those who do not own them, and who are not privy to the stories they hold) may see them as ordinary or worthless. I would argue that these objects, which are thus both ordinary and extraordinary, are the very things that make us, us. Sherry Turkle (2011) writes: "we find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" (p. 5). This project situates itself in this less-familiar ground, exploring what happens when the owners of these belongings are faced with the reality of letting them go.

These belongings, as sometimes life-long companions to their owners, do not normally present a problem – until, that is, their owner is faced with a situation where they must downsize their accommodations or otherwise confront the necessity of ridding themselves of possessions. Indeed, individuals may not even consider certain belongings to be precious or sentimental until they are faced with this reality of parting with them. Baby boomers (those born between 1946-1964) make up 27% of the nation's population (Randstad, 2020). For the first time in this country's history, Canada is home to more people over the age of 65 than those under 15 (Randstad, 2020). Members of this large demographic purchased homes or other dwellings early in their lives when they were settling down and starting families. Now, they're reaching retirement age and many of them are looking to downsize, whether out of necessity or their own desire. According to a study done by Royal LePage in June 2021, 35% of Canadian baby boomers said that they were considering purchasing a new primary residence in the next five years, with 63% of that group reporting that they were considering downsizing or purchasing a property smaller than where they currently resided (Royal LePage, 2021).

However, baby boomers are not the only population addressed by this research. While my project considers this older generation that is currently moving through a downsizing cycle, this research also looks at people of any age who are moving (for any reason) and have to part with significant belongings. It further considers the perspectives of individuals who have recently gotten rid of belongings, that they now regret parting with. While people of any age may be faced with getting rid of or passing on prized personal belongings, this phenomenon is of particular importance in our current moment both due to the downsizing trend among older Canadians, and to the recent focus on minimal, ultra-organized living perpetuated by influential figures such as Marie Kondo and Kim Kardashian.

As a result, the decluttering and organizational industry has boomed. "Sales of home organizational products are projected to rise 3.8% annually through 2021 to \$11.8 billion" (Freedonia Group, 2017). This sector is growing: home organization is a multi-billion-dollar industry in Canada alone. But does this industry acknowledge the

¹ For example, a luxury home organization company, NEAT, describes its services as follows, “NEAT specializes in fully customized solutions for each individual client. We pride ourselves on being a full turn-key service; we organize, purchase organizational solutions, implement these solutions, donate/ consign unwanted items and leave you living the NEAT life” (NEAT Method, 2022). Nowhere in this description or on their website is there any mention of the emotions that this process can trigger or a method for effectively dealing with those.

² This is not strictly a contemporary phenomenon, either: consider the case of Honoré Jaxon, former secretary of Louis Riel. Jaxon sympathized with the plight of Métis and Indigenous populations across Canada, and in the 1920s he moved to New York and started collecting books and other written works with the goal of establishing a library for the Indigenous people of Saskatchewan and Western Canada. Later in his life he became unhoused because of not being able to perform his job, and lived the remainder of his life on the streets of New York with his crates and crates of books and papers. As curator Anthony Kiendl notes, “Jaxon was unconcerned about his loss of home and job. According to a newspaper account, his lament was that he now had no place for his library” (Kiendl, 2004, p. 14). While Jaxon’s case is extreme but it is a good example of objects acting as “home” in place of a traditional dwelling. The memories and significance that they hold is enough for the collector.

emotional process that comes with getting rid of personal belongings? Most of the time these services tout their ability to declutter a space or create a more minimal way of living for their customer but with this process can come anxiety, stress, and even trauma which is the stage of decluttering, downsizing or moving that can be extremely difficult for those involved¹. Parting with sentimental belongings, which have no practical purpose or rational reason for being retained, is not a process that should be taken lightly.

It is important to note, when discussing retaining objects and trauma surrounding giving them away, that this research does not examine hoarding. There are many examples of the retention and connection to belongings becoming a hoarding situation but that is a specific subsection of the discussion of material culture and one that this MRP does not touch. Most of us are familiar with the phenomenon of hoarding, and hoarders, highlighted in recent TV shows, and other media; this involves situations where individuals develop a pathological relationship to their objects, being seemingly unable to throw anything away². While interesting in its own right, this MRP instead deals with the more commonplace experience of a person faced with downsizing or moving, and the choices that must be made to retain or discard of (or otherwise pass on) objects, even those which may be of particular significance. In hoarding, every possession seems to take on this status of equal importance, which is not the case for most of us.

In a survey done by ClosetMaid (2018), 57% of respondents said they keep items for sentimental reasons; the survey also found that 15% of those surveyed had lied to a loved one, telling them they had gotten rid of an item when actually they had hidden it to avoid having to part with it. As the authors of a study on possessions and self-worth note, “viewers [of the show *Clean House*] may find it hard to understand why the owner dissolves into tears as seemingly useless items are sold at a yard sale or thrown in the trash...These individuals react to the loss of possessions with intense feelings; they grieve for their loss” (Ferraro, Escalas, and Bettman, 2010, p. 169). It’s clear that there is an emotional process that that is initiated when an individual must part with a personally important belonging: understanding this emotional process, and designing a framework based in storytelling to minimize pain and stress around the letting go of these belongings, is my main goal for this undertaking.

In the next five years, it is projected that there will be 3.2 million people buying new homes and downsizing in Canada alone (Royal LePage, 2021). With this comes a need for a better way of preserving the value in personal belongings — and a method that allows people to pass them on to a new generation of owners, or otherwise relinquish these objects, with minimal pain or grief.

Examining Downsizing

There have been few extensive studies of downsizing; nor are there a multitude of papers examining the effect this process can have on those experiencing it. As Luborsky, Lysack, and Van Nuil state, “today, despite rich data on financial, demographic, and architectural features, we lack insights into what comprises the experiences of doing one’s downsizing, what is the nature and kinds of focal concerns that inform the experience, and how the changes to residents and material artifacts are placed within wider social life” (2011, p. 2). By analyzing individuals’ relationships with their sentimental belongings, I plan to use a qualitative interview-based approach and a cultural framework considering the significance of objects and storytelling to create a narrative-based tool for guiding the passing on of significant belongings. Luborsky et al. go on to say, “to date, the research has commonly understood downsizing to be a mostly practical affair: items are sorted through and then dispatched to their designated end” (2011, p. 2). When an individual is downsizing, they are confronted with choices (vis-à-vis their belongings) that they perhaps have never had to make, even when decluttering or organizing their belongings earlier in life. Through this project, in examining this aspect through a study of the human connection to objects (both cultural-historical and through specific participant interviews), leads to the development of frameworks to diminish the stress of handing belongings off. Through their research Luborsky et al. discovered that downsizing is of course not just a lengthy process of cataloguing your things and then deciding what to keep and what to dispose of. Instead, they argue that it evokes a powerful sense of “place experience,” where the individual doing the downsizing is faced with multiple different periods and facets in their life and is forced to reconcile all of these with the overarching reminder of the need to decrease the number of possessions they own (2011). These people are “grappling with connections to enduring streams of life engagement in sets of social relationships, identities, and experiences” (Luborsky et al., 2011, p. 4). Objects considered during downsizing are more than just objects—as this MRP will demonstrate, they represent periods of life, relationships and connections to people and places, memories, and stories. Collectively, these personal belongings represent (and help to secure) identity and a sense of self.

The process of considering these objects during downsizing can thus also be seen as an exercise in understanding ourselves, and perhaps acknowledging the self that we once were, versus the self we are now; this is a reckoning with how our present self sits with the things we have accumulated over our lives, and which of our possessions best suit our current self. In his book *Downsizing: Confronting Our Possessions in Later Life*, David J. Ekerdt writes, “I want to kindle admiration for those who accomplish household downsizing...Not only do they divest great quantities of material, they adapt, reconcile themselves to age-related limitations, and solve a problem that most others put off to another day. They change themselves in the process” (2020, p. 5). By making choices about what to keep and bring to a new dwelling and what to part with, the individual is making decisions about who they want to be moving forward and the kind of self that they want to present to any visitors in their new space. The owners must consider what role these personal belongings play both in this change, and in preserving identity in a new location.

Drawing on research into memory, storytelling, and the importance of objects to cultural and personal identity-formation and maintenance, supported by participant interviews, in this Major Research Project I develop a prototype model for a narrative-based framework to support the passing of significant personal belongings into new hands. This framework takes into account both the practicalities of downsizing and moving, as well as the emotional turmoil and embedded memories and stories that come to the surface when individuals come to terms with the fact that they may have to part with some of their precious belongings.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I have developed the following research questions to guide this work and inform the final outcome:

- What is the connection between personal objects and memory?
- How might we use storytelling to access, preserve, and share these stored memories?
- Could a framework be developed to allow for these stories to be shared, ensuring the object that is passed on retains something of its narrative or sentimental value, thus minimizing a sense of loss on the part of the original owner?

1.3 INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH GOALS

As a person who forms deep, emotional connections with objects, I am extremely interested in exploring the relationships that other individuals have to their sentimental belongings. Susan Stewart (1993) describes narrative as “a structure of desire, a structure that both invents and distances its object” (ix). In the process, she writes, narrative “inscribes again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the symbolic” (p. ix) – that is, for the production of connections that go beyond a closed or literal meaning of an object. I situate my own research in this space, finding a bridge or connection between the individual owner of the object and the object itself, the latter understood as a repository for imbued memory and significance. It is my hope that a renewed attention to these narratives will allow others to connect with and preserve the stories of their precious belongings, and transmit these to future generations or new owners.

The principal areas for inquiry for this project include objects and their connection to memory, how storytelling may be used in different contexts and cultures to unlock these stored memories, and the potential benefits of deploying narrative for those who are preparing to downsize or get rid of some possessions. Additionally, further richness is gained through an examination of object-transfer in other cultures, specifically with migrant situations where people leave their country of origin, either voluntarily or not. The preservation of objects from ‘home’ in migrants’ new context has lessons for the role of objects in negotiating identity, or maintaining it in moments of life transition or crisis. In such cases, “objects are seen as markers of migrants’ identity that help to balance and negotiate established attachments to their home country and newly developed connections with the receiving one” (Pechurina, 2020, p. 670). These objects, carried from country to country, develop layers of meaning and significance to their owners. While not precisely parallel to downsizing, such experiences may help provide context and a deeper understanding of that current North American phenomenon.

1.4 INTRODUCTION

EXPLORING TERMS

Before moving further into this document, we need to clarify a term that will be used throughout this paper. It is the word “belonging(s).” This is a term with multiple meanings, with cultural and linguistic nuances wherever it (or its cognates) appears. For the purposes of this paper, I draw inspiration from the nuanced German word, *Habseligkeiten*, which corresponds roughly to the English “belongings.” This word, which can mean ‘possessions,’ doesn’t primarily signify a possessive or acquisitive ownership; rather, it carries a friendly and sympathetic overtone: “Typical for those with these kinds of possessions would be a six-year-old child who empties his pockets to take joy in what he has collected” (Deutsche Welle, 2004). This joyful feeling and reflecting with happiness and pride on the things you have collected throughout your life, regardless of monetary value, is exactly the feeling I am exploring with this research, and which for me is encompassed in this term, belonging(s). I will be using the term belonging(s) throughout this MRP to signify these important, sentimental objects.

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

METHODOLOGY

This project combines tools and methods from research, design thinking and strategy. When beginning to try to frame the problem and understand how a solution could be reached, it became evident that primary research, in the form of participant interviews, had to be conducted in order to grasp the nuance of individuals' relationships with their belongings. Key questions and curiosities guided each stage of the research and learning process.

Initially this report was going to be divided into two portions: a literature review featuring secondary research and existing bodies of work by other scholars, followed by insights from the primary research I would conduct, laddering up to the designed framework or solution. As my thinking progressed and the study developed, the report now features a more organic structure. Insights from participant interviews are examined, discussed, and interpreted with the support of secondary research and prior studies. Conflicting viewpoints are also included throughout the document, to mitigate any biases on the part of the researcher or the participants as much as possible.

The outcome of the report is the narrative-based framework to help people who are moving, downsizing, or decluttering, to part with belongings of personal value in a way that minimizes anxiety, trauma, and regret. This framework is solidly based in the insights from the participant interviews as well as in the supporting evidence or insights from the literature review.

This research study employs the iterative double-diamond model of problem finding, problem framing, and problem solving.

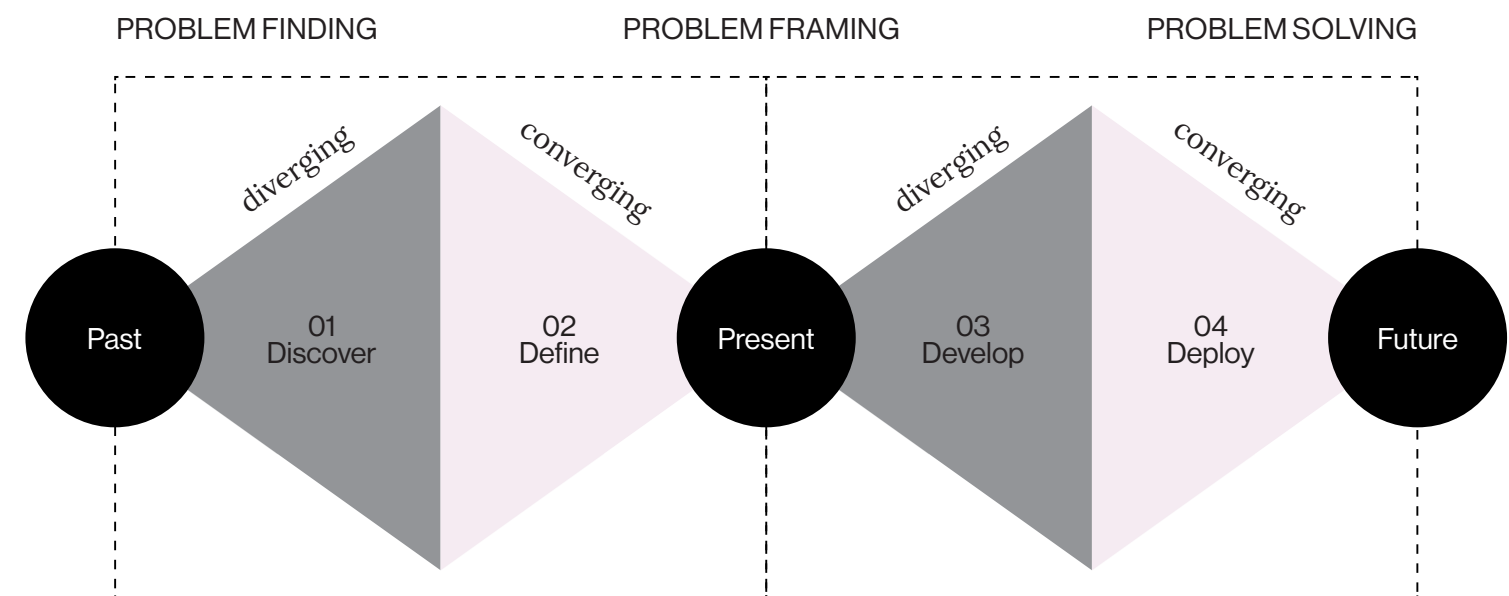


Figure 1: Project methodology based on United Kingdom's Design Council Diamond Model

Phase 1: Discover

In this phase the problem is identified specifically and put into context. It serves as the 'so what' driving this research: why is this an important area to study, and who will benefit from the outcome?

Phase 2: Define

With the answers from Phase 1 in mind, Phase 2 consists of narrowing down the specific area of focus for the research within the area of significant belongings, storytelling, and memory. This is defined through the process of secondary research and participant interviews.

Phase 3: Develop

This is where insights from both primary and secondary research start to be woven together to create and inform insights and learnings that will shape the narrative in the final phase. Potential solutions come to light, and contrasting viewpoints aired for any value from either side.

Phase 4: Deploy

This is the phase where all the research and thinking comes together in the form of a series of stepped questions that can be used by those considering or in the process of getting rid of personal belongings. The solution is described and explained in depth.

2.2 RESEARCH DESIGN APPROACH

Primary Research

Participant interviews were conducted with select individuals about a personal belonging that is of great personal importance to them. As a starting point for considering my questions, I drew on Sherry Turkle's questions from her book *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*: "where does [the thing] take you, what do you feel, and what are you able to understand?" From there, I developed a series of my own questions in order to gain a better understanding of the participants' connection to their belonging, and which memories or relationships it holds for them. To make sense of the data gathered, I then reviewed the notes and audio recordings of these interviews and compared them, asked follow-up questions, and considered the emerging themes. In most cases, I also received a photograph (taken by the participant) of the selected belonging. Participants were recruited via individuals in my personal network who shared the information about this research with their friends and family to generate interest. Successful potential participants were people who had recently downsized or moved. Aside from this, there were no limitations placed on who was able to participate. The interviews were conducted with ten individuals who ranged in age from 20 - 80 and who primarily live across Canada (with a few participants living in the United States). The significant belongings brought to the research were a bell, a set of paintings, a china cabinet, a dining table, a small statue of an Egyptian god, a clock, a marble walrus, a sign from a memorial, cards from children, and a set of geodes. These belongings range from things people see every day, to those only looked at occasionally; but they all hold a special value or meaning for their owners. Additionally, some interviewees discussed belongings that had been given away or otherwise disposed of in the past, but which they now regretted parting with.

Through this work, I am aiming to understand peoples' connection to objects, how their belongings hold memories, and how storytelling can be used to minimize pain when it comes to parting with these belongings, with the goal of developing a framework to aid the process of downsizing or passing on of these belongings. It would be difficult to achieve this by only examining my personal relationships to objects and my memories, therefore, interviewing others about their significant objects is the most appropriate way to conduct this research. Doing so also demonstrates how this project may serve others – by understanding the stories behind their personal objects and articulating these in a form that can be preserved and transferred to the objects' recipient(s) (or, alternately, in case of the object's loss or destruction) people might be able to more confidently part with objects that are no longer serving them, with minimal grief and pain.

Secondary Research

An extensive literary review was conducted to assess historical and contemporary viewpoints on material culture, storytelling, and memory, and how these relate to significant belongings. Further research was conducted into specific time periods, manufacturing processes, and other information received from the participant interviews, to help me understand the nuance of their significant object.

Research Considerations

The following considerations were taken into account while planning the research process and any limitations are acknowledged by the research team:

Time and Resource Constraints – The timeframe of the degree in which this MRP was developed, and the structural limits of the study imposed by that degree, meant a relatively short timeframe for interviewing, literature review, and the development of frameworks. Further to these normal concerns, this research was conducted over the course of seven months during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the context of COVID-19 and keeping in mind best practices in terms of the health and safety of the research team as well as the participants, I could not visit participants’ homes to conduct in-person interviews or photograph their belongings, as had been my initial intention.

Participant Mix – While I endeavoured to interview a diverse group of people, the majority of the participants, sourced from my personal networks, were white individuals from middle-to-upper-class backgrounds. Future research on this subject might include a broader range of ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses.

When studying material culture and person-object relationships, there is a crucial difference between the researcher or observer and the owner of these possessions. For the analyst of the objects, the significance or meaning of the object for the owner is not a simple one to discover, but neither is it clouded by the mundanity, complications, and individual characteristics and peculiarities that the owner has to grapple with. “For the analyst...the object can be rendered all-powerful, perfectly understandable, and historically crucial...however, once the voice of the user is introduced, clarity and certainty give way to multiple interpretations, practices and manipulations. What was once fixed by analytic measure and conceptual clarity alone melts away” (Woodward, 2007, p. 4-5).

Reading someone else’s personally significant objects, as someone who is unattached to/uninvested in them, is a considerably different task than trying to read one’s own possessions. In seeking to understand these connections between objects and their owners, to see how storytelling can help develop a framework for releasing objects into new hands, it is an asset for me to interview people who I do not know personally and whose objects I have not previously encountered. This will afford me a perspective unmarred by their personal nuanced connection to their chosen significant object; at the same time, I have both to take these participants at their word about the meaning of their belongings, and read their accounts against a broader framework of how memory, attachment, and narrative work.

I was not able to enter into participants’ homes and observe their belongings as the homeowner intended for people to see them. Had I been able to, this would have allowed for even more perspective into the participants’ inalienable objects.

3.1 RESEARCH INSIGHTS

MATERIAL CULTURE

Material Culture and the Significance of Objects

The term “material culture” denotes the range of material and visual productions of human culture throughout history; its study endeavours to understand the connection between human beings and their significant, personal, sentimental belongings. Humans have always been deeply connected to objects and personal belongings; even where we lack written records to attest to this, we can see evidence of this connection. Small sculptural figures of no obvious practical use have been found with the bodies of prehistoric nomadic peoples; further to these feelings of closeness and emotional bonds with objects, people have historically been buried with items of evident value to them. Of course, Ancient Egyptians, and other communities throughout history are famous for having tombs filled with gold and riches reflecting the person’s status during life, but more frequently, the small, less-valuable items buried alongside the individual, are most interesting to me.

Beyond the wealthy who bring their gold and jewels to the afterlife, to be buried with a small token from your life that holds memories, exemplifies the importance of these belongings to humans and our deep emotional connections to them. Contemporary, celebrity examples are numerous: the musical artists Ronnie Van Zant (buried with his favourite fishing pole) and Miles Davis (buried with at least one of his beloved trumpets), and the actor Tony Curtis (buried with his grandson’s baby shoes, his favourite book, and a much-loved hat), to provide just a few examples (StarsInsider, 2021). Even if we don’t believe that we will need material provisions in the afterlife, our taking them to the grave with us testifies to their importance to us – and to our identities. My first area of research in this MRP takes up this aspect of material culture, registering insights into how humans have historically thought about their things, to help illuminate how we think about objects and our connections to them now.

Material culture studies, as a field of inquiry, considers objects and the impact they have on the people, relationships, interactions, and environment around them. Scholars of material culture desire to understand social life through the application and interpretation of discourses, codes, narratives, and symbols which, all of which place objects and individual performance within a variety of social contexts (Woodward, 2007). These objects can range in size, shape, and type – from the ordinary, to the unusual, to networked objects (such as trains or planes or computers). Typically (and my own MRP will follow this trend), the objects studied by material culture scholars are smaller, portable objects, rather than monumental architecture or statuary (Woodward, 2007).

Defining Culture

Scholars have long used the material remains from past eras to glean information about other times and cultures, and our distinction from or similarity to them. As A. A. Berger writes, “these objects provide information about what we are like and how we live now – and how we lived in earlier times” (Berger, 2014, p. 16). In addition to tools and other utilitarian objects, the study of ancient, medieval cultures and culture in general has uncovered innumerable artifacts and evidence of what we might understand to be personal objects, or significant objects. What is clear is that we continue doing the same things today that our ancestors did, in continuing to mark, preserve, express, and ground our identities and larger cultures through connections to our personally significant objects. In the *Encyclopedia of Media and Communication*–, Frank Nuessel provides this modern definition of culture:

The word ‘culture’ comes from the past participle *cultus* of the Latin verb *colere*, which means ‘to till.’ In its broadest sense, the term refers to recurrent patterns of human behaviour and associated artefacts that reflect the beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of a particular society or group of people. This behaviour includes oral and written symbols such as language (folk tales, proverbs) as well as other traditions including dress, religion, rituals (dance, music, and other culture-specific rites), and so forth. Artefacts may include the representational arts such as paintings, pottery, sculpture, written literature, architecture, and the tools necessary to create them – all of which are transmitted from one generation to another (2013, p. 207).

In this definition, it is clear that the transmission of objects from one generation to another is an important part of preserving culture. This intergenerational cultural transmission, through which values and traditions are passed down, is not only associated with particular objects; but these objects and artefacts may themselves be a kind of repository of memory and narrative. These types of objects can help to preserve tradition and culture and stories are the mechanism for the preservation of this tradition and culture, these stories are embedded into objects and artifacts passed from one generation to the next. In traditional cultures, with smaller community groups and a more integrated cultural life, this transmission may come naturally as objects seen in use, connected with certain stories become part of the next generation. While we all still use objects to reflect and assert our identities and culture, memories, experience, and relationships, we are less likely to experience this direct transmission of family or cultural heritage through the passing of objects and their associated stories and meanings from one generation to the next. With younger generations increasingly wanting to purchase new things as they create lives for themselves in their own spaces, this transmission of culture and stories through heirlooms or antique family treasures is in jeopardy. I argue that as objects are transmitted from one generation to the next, we need to be more direct and purposeful about the transmission of their value, the culture they represent, along with the objects themselves. If we receive something from a family member who has died, the ‘meaning’ of the object may just be that it belonged to them (it is a memory of them); for future generations it is significant because of multi-generational transmission (it has always been in our family); if it has monetary/exchange value, our attachment to it may consciously overrule this (it is worth more to me – from a symbolic perspective – than any money I might get for it). These are the strong bonds that recipients form with these intergenerational objects.

When an object is transmitted to a new owner in the absence of a story, as often happens, this cultural transmission is at best limited. Without an accompanying narrative or history for the object, a person receiving it out of context (even if they

are related to the giver) will not fully grasp the transmission of a rich and full culture, and can therefore not incorporate it into their current life or pass this story on to new generations; with each subsequent passing-along of the object, the connection may in fact become weaker, rather than stronger. A narrative accompanying an object being passed down can enliven the object for the receiver, ensuring its place as a holder of certain memories, traditions, culture, and relationships in that person’s life. This contributes to the inalienable quality of belongings of this nature.

One of my research participants, Emma, learned about her grandparents through her chosen sentimental belonging, a small metal statue of Egyptian god Osiris (Appendix B). I know it was this specific exhibit that they went to on King Tut’s tomb, I know the year they went, I know they bought this exact item at the gift shop, then it was in their house then my room. So, I can feel the history having passed it by. But then it being specifically connected to them, both being interested in museums and learning and then me being specifically interested in ancient Egypt since the age of 3 and I still am, and I love that...I think it’s a specific thing that I know the exact history of, not just from my grandparents but also a symbol of a shared interest (Emma, personal interview, October 26, 2021).

This object holds sentimental value for Emma, not only because it was purchased and owned by her grandparents (and thus is a token of remembrance of them), but also as part of this continuity of tradition and interest. This transmission of interest down multiple generations helps the story of the object evolve with each passing owner. This belonging, passed from grandparents to grandchild, has helped solidify and materially express a love of learning, of museums, a natural curiosity shared by the older generation and the younger one. In essence, the culture of the family, the interests of the family are both embodied by and transmitted by this one object.

Capitalism and Consumption

Although social scientists have historically been interested in objects and the material aspects of culture, ongoing shifts in our habits of consumption and materialism have encouraged an increased recent interest in objects and the meanings objects take on as they move through various networks. We cannot discuss sentimental, personal belongings without recognizing the important roles played in those by capitalism and our culture of consumption. Some sentimental belongings are consumer goods that have become personally significant over time. We need to consider the place of significant personal objects in relation to capitalism and consumer society, particularly insofar as these objects seem, or claim, to escape the cycles of desire, exchange, promised fulfilment, and marketing, to become something distinct from other kinds of ownership. In some sense, these are consumer objects that have transcended their origins, and have also transcended the desire-disappointment cycle that is foundational to consumer society³. “Objects, once acquired, eventually and perpetually disappoint – they never really satisfy the deep psychological needs that direct us toward them in the first instance. Consumer capitalism is thus founded upon a psychological lack that is perpetually stimulated, but never satiated” (Woodward, 2011, p. 372). However, sentimental or significant personal objects appear to be the rare objects that do fulfill a psychological lack, that do not disappoint. They are inalienable, irreplaceable so long as they continue to embody significant narratives in our lives. We are not motivated to replace them, as even a physically identical replica would ultimately be a disappointment; these are largely fungible goods that have become singular, non-fungible. The value of

³For more on this see Stavrakakis, 2006

the sentimental belonging doesn’t lie in its monetary worth or the satisfaction that one gets from making a new purchase; it resides in the memories, relationships and stories that these sentimental belongings hold, from years of being in one family or from a strong memory associated with them, and retold in relation to the belonging.

Accumulation of things, especially over the course of a lifetime, can present practical challenges to individuals faced with downsizing – or merely guilt over a sense of overaccumulation, the latter possibly exacerbated by popular cultural admonitions to ‘declutter’ or adopt minimal lifestyles. In my interview with Jordan, we discussed the process of her getting rid of an item of clothing that she liked a lot, but didn’t wear enough:

I was feeling that I have too many things I need to get rid of things and if I’m not wearing it I shouldn’t keep it...So I was like, you know what? I don’t wear it, it’s fine and I got rid of it...ok I don’t have to think about that anymore, which was a positive thing. But maybe my reasonings behind getting rid of it were more outside pressure or this guilt instead of thinking through other ways this item could exist (Jordan, personal interview, November 1, 2021).

Contemporary western society exerts contradictory pressures on individuals to both continually consume and find fulfillment in purchases, and conversely to not own too many things, to declutter, and adopt a minimal way of living. This makes holding onto significant belongings more challenging, especially if they are not one-of-a-kind precious heirlooms. In the face of societal pressure to declutter, and the simultaneous pressures to achieve satisfaction through our purchase of consumer goods, how are individuals to know how to properly relate to their things?

In an effort to understand objects, desire, and emotion, Woodward writes that in our handling and use of “objectual things..., the material, pragmatic and emotional work together” (Woodward, 2011, p. 367). This is true, he suggests, even in the case of objects we don’t yet own – where fantasies of ownership and attendant myths of happiness through possession can linger once the object is ours; or, more frequently, disappear, prompting new purchases. And yet, at times, customer objects can be transformed: through ownership, use, or the circumstances of our purchasing or receiving them (a gift from someone, bought on a trip, or in a special context), all of which serve to sustain this emotional attachment, turning a fungible or ordinary object into something inalienable.

“It has become inalienable, something that perhaps once was a mere commodity that could have been owned by anyone. But over time, possession itself turned it into something that has deep resonance for that family, not just a display item, but perhaps even a potential heirloom” (Miller, 2011, p. 90). This term, ‘inalienable item’, is one of extreme importance. It denotes a belonging that has become woven into the fabric of a family, inextricably linked to its members’ lives, senses of themselves, and history. These types of belongings are next to impossible to part with. Objects carrying an emotional connection to their owners can become even more significant, even inalienable, from their merely persisting in a home environment over years, or being moved and preserved in different spaces, accumulating layer upon layer of meaning and memory until the thing itself, even if not originally valuable or interesting in itself, cannot be parted with.

This can be especially true in the case of immigrants or refugees, who bring with them to their new homes what sociologists refer to as *diasporic objects*. These are “objects that are detached from their place of origin; through their subsequent use and ownership they are invested with new sets of meanings. These objects have a twofold function: while connecting migrants with their distant homes and cultural heritage they also act as reminders of the sense of detachment from those settings and experiences” (Pechurnia, 2020, p. 7). These objects thus refer to experiences and emotions that are both familiar and new, mixing those from their country or origin and those from their new country, and negotiating past and present locales.

As these objects exist in this new space, they signify the home culture at the same time as they attest, in this new environment, to the separation from that geographically localized point of origin “back home”. No longer is an object merely something that you brought with you while moving, it could also signify to a child the struggles and sacrifices of their parents, or to a grandchild who has only known the new country, a reminder of their grandparents’ moves and heritage. The more layers of meaning, the more stories, the more time that an object accumulates, the more inalienable and core to a family’s identity it becomes. These objects can therefore be significant to multiple generations, having different meaning and memory for each generation. Additionally, the belongings brought with a family can be markers of their status or “respectability” as Michael McMillan says of the dedicated “front rooms” furnished by West Indian immigrants in their UK homes: “as a culturally translated space, the front room’s material culture and prescribed codes of behaviour are inscribed through a deeply aspirational black culture in the process of becoming that idealised Victorian bourgeois trope [of the respectable homeowner]” (2019, p. 186). The objects collected in the front room are more than just possessions: they serve to cement the family’s place in their new home and their position in the eyes of their new neighbours and community. At the same time, the artifacts and belongings in this space are marked by their separation out of their original context, forming a negotiated identity between the West Indian origin and the new surroundings.

What immigrants decide to take with them when they (willingly or unwillingly) leave their country of origin, is very telling of their family relationships, and what is most important to them to maintain in their lives, as well as perceived carriers of “home”: “certain objects - either left behind or carried through the border - are associated with strong emotional investment; they acquire affective value, or become ‘sensitive’” (Pechurnia, 2020, p. 4). One way in which this can manifest in using objects to maintain relationships with “home” – with local culture, with family members or friends that now are now far away. Bringing a certain object provide a link to their former country and their old life, as well as to others who remain behind. Moving to a new country and building a home there can be seen as an exercise in “the (re)making, negotiating and acknowledging of one’s place in the world’ or producing their identity narrative” (Pechurnia, 2020, p. 6). The process of making a space a home through the display of certain objects thus brings one’s culture to the forefront in the construction of domestic interior space, and marks that space as a site of negotiation between one’s new location and one’s place of origin (“back home”), asserting a material link to everything, and everyone, left behind.

Three of the interviewed participants brought up this topic of objects in relation to transience and relocation. Greg: “we moved a lot when I was a kid and as an adult about 15-17 times I’ve moved, so I’ve never become attached to a home” (Greg, personal interview, October 27, 2021); Janet (speaking of her cherished dining table): “when I got

a house, my first house in the States, it was shipped to Taos New Mexico. Then I moved from Taos, New Mexico to Cincinnati, Ohio and that table moved there. And then it moved to Toronto, so it’s been in three of the homes that I’ve owned” (Janet, personal interview, October 26, 2021); Gillian: “my family has moved around a lot, I was born in the States, and we lived in England for a chunk of time so objects that have stayed through that whole process have obviously become more meaningful as they have moved to different locations. This clock has remained literally throughout my entire life” (Gillian, personal interview, October 22, 2021).

When people move often, no matter what age they are, the objects that remain consistent around them frequently become complete fixtures in their lives, which they couldn’t imagine parting with – or making a new home without. Belongings are personally significant and this is why they are retained during moves, which further highlights a sense of continuity across these changes. With each subsequent move (and each subsequent ‘making the cut’) this elevates these belongings to inalienable status or even giving to them the character of “home” – i.e., your new abode is ‘home’ only once this belonging is in it.

Typically, we feel most comfortable in rooms where the things are of this meaningful nature, connected to a memory or story; we surround ourselves with things that reflect ourselves in more or less meaningful ways. Our ‘taste’ is one expression of this, but family, loves, memory, experiences, are also reflected here. In some rooms, humanity and materialism are one and the same, “an unlimited respect for the capacity of people expressed through things” (Miller, 2011, p. 97). A person is represented in rooms like this through their possessions, whatever they are: a photograph of them, a piece of art, a souvenir, a trinket, an heirloom, and so on. “All that matters is that feelings are respected and placed here, in some form or other, with feeling. This is a *living* living room, an animated scrapbook of juxtaposed relationships” (Miller, 2011, p. 98). In other words, such people decorate their spaces and curate their things to relive memory, tell stories, and organize and honour their relationships with important people in their lives, living or deceased.

An interview participant, Jordan, told me about her “ancestor altar” that she keeps by her workspace in her home. She said, “I keep a kind of an ancestor altar and I have a photo of my grandmother there and I put this bell by it too. So, it’s her photo and this bell and it just helps me to keep her memory close to me in a material way...I have a kind of ritual practice around honouring my ancestors” (Jordan, personal interview, November 1, 2021). This is an informal ritual of her own invention, but one that is critical to maintaining this important connection to her grandmother. This photo, along with her significant belonging – the bell that belonged to her grandmother (Appendix C) – helps to keep her memory alive, and honour her in a public room of the house. Visitors to Jordan’s space can feel the active humanity in the chosen items on display.

Heirlooms, which constitute a specific category of significant personal objects, retain this inalienable quality differently than other objects. As Kayla O’Daniel writes: “categorized as inalienable objects, as opposed to alienable objects that can disassociate from their possessors, heirlooms absorb the essence of the previous owner” (2017, p. 17). These objects are passed on to younger generations while retaining the memories and spirit of their previous owners. For their current owner, this item then represents a physical link to the history of their family and specific elements of their relatives, preserving and representing these relationships regardless of the distance between the owner and their family. These items can become even more valuable to their owner upon the death of a previous owner, making this emotional connection to the object or heirloom stronger and the inalienable quality of the object more pronounced. This process can turn an ordinary commodity into a treasured heirloom or serve to solidify something that had been passed down into a belonging never to be parted with – and in turn each subsequent recipient into a custodian of the object for the next generation, rather than its ‘owner’.

One interviewee discussed a china cabinet that had been made by their great-great-grandfather. At the time it was made, it was likely intended as a purely functional piece of furniture and was probably given to the next generation with that mindset. But as the years have gone by, this piece has been passed down five generations, with no sign that the current generation will do anything other than pass it on to the next. The layers of meaning it has accumulated will be different for each generation who has owned it, but it has made the transition from a functional piece to a completely inalienable object for this family – its meaning is now, in some significant way, this history of inheritance.

Photographs should be mentioned here, as objects whose inherent inalienability depend on their subject matter. “A man’s most valued possession might be a photo of his deceased wife taken on a particularly memorable trip. The ‘possession’ here is not so much the photograph but rather memories and experiences that cannot be bought at any price” (Richins, 1994, p. 505). The photograph becomes inalienable for a few reasons in this example, it is a connection to a relationship that no longer exists, it holds memories of that person, and it reminds the man of things he experienced on that trip with his wife. I found in my interviews that even when discussing other significant objects, many participants also mentioned photographs, as having a very close link with memory.

As Elizabeth Edwards writes, “photographs belong to that class of objects formed specifically to remember, rather than being objects around which remembrance accrues through contextual association” (1999, p. 222). Photographs can be particularly tricky in relation to decluttering or downsizing because of their indexical relationship to their subjects (i.e. the idea that this person was, at that moment, before the camera lens, and was captured in it) and their ability to bring a person to life so vividly. When discussing why it took so long to part with her significant belonging – a poster featuring a photo of her father from his memorial, interview participant Jenny said, “100%, it’s all about that picture, thinking ‘oh my god I’m going to get rid of this picture?’ If it had just been writing I could not have cared less, it would have been straight to the curb” (Jenny, personal interview, November 1, 2021). She also acknowledged that the photograph wasn’t a particularly good one and that she had many more around her home to prompt memories of her father; but the fact that this poster had an image of him on it at all, made it more difficult to know what to do with it.

In the case of significant belongings, and particularly inalienable ones, the role played by these objects in communicating and affirming – to oneself as well as to others – aspects of identity, is central to their perceived value (Richins, 1994, p. 505). As previously noted, in such cases financial value or rarity is far less significant than the symbolic or sentimental meaning in determining its importance (interviewees frequently expressed that they would not get rid of an object for any amount of money). Personally significant belongings may also be monetarily valuable, but this is never their primary signification or reason for their importance in their owner’s life. In our interview, Sarah discussed a pair of shoes that her grandparents had given to her when she was a teenager, following our discussion of her geodes. The shoes were impractical and she didn’t wear them a lot; recently she was looking for them and was unable to find them, leading her to the sad conclusion that she had given them away. When asked what it would mean to her to have them back, she replied, “I think it would just be another connection to my grandparents. It would mean a lot. I’ve thought about...if I went out in stores and found them somewhere...I think it would just be elation” (Sarah, personal interview, October 19, 2021). In this case we can see that these shoes were not rare or particularly valuable, or even functional as shoes, but having them back, as something that her grandparents had given her before they died, would mean recovering something of irreplaceable value.

Personification of Objects

In certain circumstances, objects can become so intertwined in our lives that we personify them and attribute to them a life of their own, complete with thoughts and feelings. Writing about the experience of clearing out his parents’ house after their deaths, Marcin Wicha says, “the objects already knew. They felt they would be moved soon, shifted out of place, handled by strangers. They’d gather dust. They’d smash. Crack. Break at the unfamiliar touch. Soon nobody will remember what was bought at the Hungarian center. Or at the Desa gallery, the folk art stall, the antique shop – in times of prosperity” (2021, p. 7). The memories and stories within these belongings, acquired at different times and at different places by his parents, made them into quasi-members of the family; for Wicha, getting rid of them felt like losing a person, but also letting the belonging down itself, by releasing it into unfamiliar custody. I heard this same sentiment in the interviews I conducted as part of this research. Margaret told me about a walrus sculpture named Wilfred (Appendix D) who she described as “a beautiful serpentine marble walrus with great long tusks and he is very much part of our family” (Margaret, personal interview, October 22, 2021). Belongings can move even father from inalienable status to being regarded – even if only metaphorically – as real, sentient beings with emotions who have to be treated as loved ones.

Objects as Home

The items that we choose to surround ourselves with and display to others when they visit our homes, can say a lot about us. For the anthropologist Daniel Miller, “whoever you are...[you’re] actually a museum curator, an artist, and perhaps even a designer” (Miller, 2011, p. 88); that is, every homeowner or renter or anyone who decorates their living space, in this sense, is a museum curator and designer, carefully selecting and arranging items on public display, often corresponding to some theme or insight. Many of the items you see when entering someone’s home indicate something about the past of the owner, regardless of whether the belonging is old or a recent addition to one’s collection (Miller, 2011). I found similar sentiments in the interviews: Emma, for instance, said, “I have very carefully selected things in the living room because this is a good story, or this is my prettiest book” (Emma, personal interview, October 26, 2021). She is carefully curating her outward-facing living space to present an aesthetically pleasing image to guests, but also has populated this space with belongings of significance with stories attached so that she has a good excuse to tell these stories when asked about various belongings.

Our dwellings can be seen as the sites within which we display our informal collections. This project does not examine formal collecting of objects and organizing them into collections, but rather the informal collecting of belongings that fill a home (and which could alternately, by outsiders, be seen as ‘just someone’s stuff’). For Anthony Kiendl, “while the array of things we gather is certainly telling, the performance of collecting is equally illuminating. The study of museums, galleries, corporations and other containers forms an interpretive matrix of knowledge, history, and beliefs” (Kiendl, 2004, p. 14). Like museum curators and gallerists, homeowners and those who decorate their dwellings are also curating an interpretive mix of knowledge, history, and beliefs. Instead of widely held beliefs, they are the knowledge, history, and beliefs that reflect the owner’s life and personal narrative, and which serve to reflect to others things about ourselves. These collections allow us to demonstrate to guests our thoughts, feelings and deeply held convictions, without saying anything at all. “Empirical studies of interactions between people, their homes and material culture suggest that there is an active meaning-making process in which all three play a role” (Hurdley, 2006, p. 719).

Each of these – people, their homes, and their belongings – have an influence on the other two, and they all work together to create the construct and the feeling of home. Without objects that point to or reflect the self, or that spur memories and narratives, a dwelling would not, we frequently assert, feel like ‘home’. This clearly demonstrates the power of objects; a collection of things can feel so connected with our

lives, memories, and emotions that it is the key determinant marking a dwelling as ours, as comfortable, as sustaining, and so on. In this conception, the spatial container is certainly less significant for this expression and confirmation of personal identity than are the objects with which we fill it. Walter Benjamin' description of the 19th century middle-class interior is germane here:

If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, 'You've got no business here.' And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark – the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars on the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows, the screen in front of the fire (1933/1996).

To enter this space, is to enter into an environment in which every element signifies the owner; homeowners take great pride in creating spaces that are true to them and their identities, which both affirms their existence in time and space, and non-verbally expresses this self to others.

3.2 RESEARCH INSIGHTS

IDENTITY AND COGNITION

As we imbue our significant belongings with meaning, they also exert an influence on us, not merely as props filling our homes and lives, but as the tools that we use to construct our identity or sense of self, in part through the construction of stories around these objects. “The practice of producing narratives around objects contributes to the personal work of autobiography and renders objects as meaningful participants in the social work of identity-building” (Hurdley, 2006, p. 718). Hurdley goes on to say that this is especially true in the home, where people privately construct narratives using their possessions to continue the ongoing work of developing and displaying themselves and their “social, moral identities” (2006). ‘Home’ is thus a site of display for these important things, and a site for connections between humans and the world, mediated by objects. What we call ‘feeling at home’ hinges on having belongings, suffused with narratives asserting our personal histories, surrounding us in our dwellings. All this further reinforces Miller’s conviction that homeowners are museum curators, carefully choosing which items to have on display for visitors to see, these things serve to reflect ourselves and our identity to our guests in a way that is not always obvious to the homeowner. The home can serve as a kind of unconscious presentation of the self; we surround ourselves with things that we like, or that are important to us – we might not regard them as presenting a clear image of who we are, but thus can be clear to a visitor or guest. These belongings tell guests about us in a way that we are unable, or unwilling, to verbalize so it is extremely important to select the items that are on display wisely. In the words of early 20th century interior decorator Elise de Wolfe: “you will express yourself in your house whether you want to or not” (de Wolfe, 1913).

Recent frameworks in cognitive science have envisioned a closer link between object-use and mental function that has previously been supposed. Andy Clark and David Chalmers have suggested that in certain mind-object interactions, including “the use of pen and paper to perform long multiplication, the use of physical re-arrangements of letter tiles to prompt word recall in Scrabble, the use of instruments such as the nautical slide rule, and the general paraphernalia of language, books, diagrams” (Clark and Chalmers, 1998), the brain delegates certain operations to the “manipulations of external media” (Clark and Chalmers, 1998). This mode of thinking, literally *through* objects, is echoed by the archaeologist Lambros Malafouris who proposes that the practice of doing things: drawing a line, making art, arranging objects, etc., changes who we are and how we think. “Humans think by constructing signs, by drawing lines and by leaving memory traces” (Malafouris, 2018, p. 3). In this sense, tools and other human-made artifacts do not reflect or represent intelligence, they enact intelligence: making a stone tool is not the product of thinking about it, it’s a way of thinking (Malafouris, 2018).⁴

This process effectively turns inside-out how we think about objects. Material engagement and mental processes are not only actions that we enact on objects; objects meaningfully participate in thinking and making. Significant personal objects, even objects that have been given or passed down to us, can possess this quality, and their owners may recognize the role these play in actualizing cognitive connections and narratives. Jordan, when asked how she would prefer to pass on her grandmother’s bell, responded by saying:

I think passing it on feels more comfortable and giving it to someone who was connected to my grandma in some way as well would help with that and just drawing those connections between relationships. Even if it’s not directly related even if it’s a different story that that’s created around the object but passing it on in such a way that at least for the time that the object is in my hands I kind of shape the story around it for the next person. Or be part of the object’s story moving forward (Jordan, personal interview, November 1, 2021).

In this sense, it is important that her ownership of this object, and the cognitive ‘shape’ of the narrative that she has constructed around it (that allows her to think in certain ways about her grandmother), are part of what gets passed on with the object to its next owner. In this ideal situation, there is no moment where the story of the belonging comes to a halt, or further owners no longer ascribe any meaning or memory to it beyond what they’re told about its past; rather, its continued presence is an ongoing engagement in thinking with and through this object. Emma, another participant, expressed a similar sentiment regarding the passing on of her Egyptian statue: “[if I knew] a kid who was nerdier or interested in history and you could tell it wouldn’t just be some cool thing to put on their shelf, that they might appreciate the idea of getting really into things and learning a lot. If I saw the idea of that personality that my grandparents had, then I would be comfortable giving it away” (Emma, personal interview, October 26, 2021). It appears important to the current owners of these objects, who use them to think in particular ways, that any new owners will continue to participate in meaning-making with these belongings, to actualize their potential for continued meaning-making; hence, their wanting to ensure that a belonging goes into the right hands, to facilitate this continued connection.

These links to the past and to identity are key reasons why losing (or being forced to part with) objects that may seem to others worthless or mundane, can be truly traumatic. In a study conducted by Ferraro, Escalas, and Bettman on the “self-possession link,” they found that “a key factor in the formation of the possession–self link is how strongly the possession reflects domains on which a person bases her self-worth,” i.e. which part of their identity this object fulfills – and that “the material value of the possession, while affecting other aspects of possession attachment, does not affect the strength of the possession–self link” (2010, p. 169). As outlined previously, the exchange-value of the object in question (its monetary value) is of little or no consequence to the owner who feels a deep, meaningful connection to it and is unable to part with it peacefully. As these researchers note, “the value in owning a possession goes beyond its functional benefits; value can be derived from the possession’s ability to symbolize important components of self-identity, such as the successes one has accomplished, the important relationships one has, and what one finds meaningful” (Ferraro et al., 2010, p. 171).

When objects become meaningful and valuable in this way, they go from being thought of as “mine,” and instead transition to being thought of as “me.” They become part of the owner’s sense of self and their identity, which becomes their primary function – so much so that their practical function may not be considered at all: an interview participant was telling me about her chosen belonging, a clock (Appendix E), which she could not part with despite the fact it no longer worked; similarly, as noted above, Sarah’s gifted shoes were impractical as shoes but were highly resonant as signs of her now-deceased grandparents. Losing an item of this nature feels like losing a piece of oneself. It is important to clarify that individuals do not grieve in this way for just any of their possessions, but only those to which they have formed this strong attachment, and which are inalienable aspects of their identity. The loss of a significant object in this context, can even be felt as trauma. Again, Walter Benjamin identified something of this in the 19th century middle-class home, in

the absurd attitude of the inhabitants of such plush apartments when something broke. Even their way of showing their annoyance – and this affect, which is gradually starting to die out, was one that they could produce with great virtuosity – was above all the reaction of a person who felt that someone had obliterated ‘the traces of his days on earth’ (Benjamin, 1993/1996).

With our identities so closely tied to our significant personal belongings, we grieve items that are lost to us or broken, almost as deeply as we would grieve losing a relationship or connection to a family member. In Indigenous communities some belongings are viewed in this way, as if they were members of the community themselves. In recent years museums all over the world have been repatriating objects stolen during colonial periods to the people and communities that should rightfully possess them. One Canadian example is a beaded hood crafted by the Cree community in James Bay, northern Quebec. It is in the process of being repatriated to the community, “We just knew we had to bring it home. We knew that it belonged. That it needed to come back and be reunited with the community where it originated” (Bernstein, 2021). These are real and profound emotions linked to the stored memories, relationships, and stories embedded in objects, and to the ways we use these to ground our sense of self in daily life.

⁴When we look at a stone tool we don’t simply see the externalization of form, skill or memory; rather we observe how the affordances of stone make possible for human bodies to learn and to remember skills, to sense causality, or to enact intentions” (Malafouris, 2018, p. 3).

3.3 RESEARCH INSIGHTS

MEMORY AND STORYTELLING

One of the main reasons why objects are so significant to individuals is memory: we imbue objects with the memories of people who owned them before, those of whom they remind us, the memory of when or how we came into possession of the object, particular times or places in our lives. In each of the interviews I conducted as part of this research, memory was mentioned by the participants, who told stories relating to memories surrounding their chosen belonging. For example, Sarah recalled acquiring her geodes (Appendix F) with her friend:

I went to a community festival in Columbus Ohio which is a big hippie-dippie festival that's great...and we stumbled upon this man who just had rocks and he had a way to break them open. And you could just pay, you picked out one you didn't know what was in it and then you were the one who broke it open. And we each did one and we each took a half a rock (Sarah, personal interview, October 19, 2021).

This memory, though it might seem mundane from the outside, is very important to Sarah as it represents many different values: her friendship with this individual, her hometown, a specific period of her life, and this community festival that she attended many times. This memory resides in this half-piece of rock; it is the object that holds and spurs the telling and retelling of this narrative remembrance.

Whatever or whoever the object reminds us of, tends to be the most significant reason for its significance to its particular owner. In a 1987 study done of 88 elderly people about objects that were precious to them, although references to “overall quality, taste, comfort, relaxation, closeness and warmth, pride and sentiment” were common (Rubinstein, 1987, p. 234), many of these emotional values were further found to be connected to objects representing different times or people from the owners’ lives, with the belongings acting as “lightning rods for feeling and memory” (Rubinstein, 1987, p. 235). This paper can only scratch the surface of memory studies, with its voluminous and constantly expanding scholarly literature; but the relationship of memory to personal belongings, heirlooms, and the potential transmission of memory to future generations through the use of objects connecting the past to the present (and future), is of great interest here.

Objects are such powerful triggers of memory that they can even prompt memories thought lost forever. A study was conducted in 2008 focusing on participants who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. These participants were presented with verbal cues to stimulate their memories of childhood, as well as non-verbal cues, such as objects or a constructed setting made to look like their childhood. Researchers found that “memories retrieved in response to objects matching the time period of the participants’ younger years were both quantitatively and qualitatively different, that is, more elaborated, spontaneous, and episodic in nature [than those in response to verbal cues]” (Kirk and Berntsen, 2008, p. 6-7). Remembering via objects, the researchers found, requires less nuanced cognitive functioning and is more involuntary or “bottom-up” as opposed to remembering something via a verbal cue which requires a “top-down strategic retrieval” of the memory (Kirk and Berntsen, 2008). So connected are memories to our precious objects, that even individuals who have an illness which affects memory can still conjure up the associated recollection without too much effort. Conversely, this same function of significant objects as anchors for memory can explain the difficulty of parting with these, even to someone whom you trust. How does one pass along a memory, the evocation of a significant moment, the embodiment of a loved one, a memory of a wonderful trip, a representation of an exceptional experience? ⁵

Heirlooms, as noted above, are consistent parts of a longer-term memory that transcends a single generation: they have both a past, and an intrinsic futurity. With the heirloom, the object becomes important to you because it was so important to someone you love, and because of this inherited directive to pass it on to the generation that follows. As Katina Lillios says, Heirlooms are maintained in circulation for a number of generations because they possess an inordinate value to their owners, not simply because it is economical or practical to do

⁵Counter to this, there are cultures in which the destruction of a gifted object is more important for memory making than cherishing the item for your lifetime and passing it on within your family. In Malagan culture, sculptures are created and painted for a person who has died. They embody specific things and trigger certain recalls for the viewer and for the person who has died. During a symbolic ceremony with the deceased person the sculptures are destroyed. The memory lives not in the keeping of the sculpture but the recollection and reproduction of images in these sculptures in the future. The memory lives also in the pieces of the destroyed sculpture which is left to rot (Küchler, 1987).

so. Heirlooms not only evoke the sentimental feelings an heir may have had for a particular parent or grandparent, but also represent links to an ancestral past, to a place filled with relationships that transcend the bounds of a human lifetime and memory. Heirlooms represent primarily a collective past, rather than the association of one individual to another (1999, p. 243)

Through these belongings that have been passed down from generation to generation, even if we are at the start of this (as the first recipient from an older generation), we can situate ourselves in a collective identity that includes all previous owners, and even the idea of family lineage itself. An object may not typically be purchased with the intent for it to become an heirloom, but in being passed down, particularly over multiple generations, it develops a symbolic ‘patina’ within a family that is difficult to erase. At other times, the force of capitalism, and of changed family fortunes, comes into play here. As heirlooms get passed down within families, they can sometimes accumulate value, potentially causing the recipients/custodians to sell when the price is too tempting or as circumstances require⁴. This could be seen, in part, as a failure of storytelling in this family. Should the story of the belonging still have been strongly attached to it and the current owners felt keenly the belonging’s place within their family and history, then it would be extremely difficult to part with, for any amount of money.

As seen in some of the interviews conducted for this project, objects with inalienable status led participants to reject the thought of selling them. “Heirlooms, as inalienable wealth and goods that are “kept-while-given,” have the power “to define who one is in an historical sense. The object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into the present, so that the histories of ancestors, titles, or mythological events become an intimate part of a person’s present identity”” (Lillios, 1999, p. 244). As Lillios describes here, heirlooms have a great power to spark memory and reminiscences. This could be the element of heirlooms and memory that prevents them from being sold, or otherwise lost to their original family. As heirlooms move through generations they can increase not only in value, but in significance. As interview participant Gillian said, “you’re probably attaching more than [the original owner] did getting it. I mean they probably didn’t purchase that...with the thought of oh god, so many memories will be brought around this, and this is so meaningful and I’m going to pass it along; they probably enjoyed the design of it or they found it suited them. It’s curious how we, as children, attach our meanings to that stuff which may not have been the case in the first place” (Gillian, personal interview, October 22, 2021).

Kayla O’Daniel writes of her experience with an old rocking chair that her grandmother always sat in, and which she encountered at her grandparents’ house after the death of her grandfather:

The real meaning of the thing then is within its mnemonic value. In a way, the chair becomes a sort of transformational object, gaining more significance after the passing of its owner. Granny Puckett’s essence and memory have been absorbed into it, especially for those left in her wake, who recognize the chair as an experience of remembrance (2007, p. 15).

In this example, the chair stands in as a proxy for her deceased grandmother. The chair will be able to conjure up memories of her grandmother and her childhood in a way that other objects or even verbal reminiscences could not. The stories that Granny Puckett told will also be embedded in the chair, ready to be accessed by anyone who knew her when they encounter this heirloom. “These stories create a history around the object, signifying the biography of the object itself, which “is no longer simply a dead or inanimate thing...It possesses—or we attribute to it in our imaginations—sentience and power” (O’Daniel, 2007, p. 17).

When asking someone about an heirloom possession, the story of its background – who owned it before them, and how it came into their possession – is always part of the object’s narrative. “These stories create a history around the object, signifying the biography of the object itself” (O’Daniel, 2017, p. 17). It is for this

reason, O’Daniel argues, that belongings, and heirlooms especially, cannot simply be read and understood for their face value. Where a person unconnected to this chair may see old, splintered wood and peeling paint, O’Daniel sees her grandmother, hears her stories, and has stories of her own at the tip of her tongue ready to impart these to anyone who is curious about its origins.

When objects are passed down to a family member or trusted friend, they take on a new life and meaning. The new owner understands things about this object because they understood things about the giver, and perhaps have a sense of the broader significance of the object. This process causes the object to develop a biography, a little bit of meaning, memory, and significance from each owner in succession. Returning to the rocking chair, O’Daniel writes: “the biography of the chair no longer stops at Granny Puckett. It is now as much a biography of my grandmother, cousin Cindy, and myself—entangled in the histories of the people who encounter it” (O’Daniel, 2007, p. 18). As objects move through different peoples’ lives, they accrue geologic strata of meaning, while memories – communicated as stories – seep into the object, becoming inseparable with it. “Because of these memories, the heirloom in question is not just a chair, but also a device of reflection—illuminating the past, present, and future. This process reveals how heirlooms become objects of memory, extending past function and becoming subjects in our collective history” (O’Daniel, 2007, p. 19).

Objects can also help us connect with a group, or initiate conversations with others. As Lynne Howarth and Lisa Quirke write, “storytelling around cherished objects can provide often socially-isolated participants with a common and ‘neutral’ space for engaging in conversation and rich interaction with others. Objects that are core to individual identity can likewise serve as ‘bridges’ linking to a group identity and helping to forge connections where social, cultural, language, economic, ethnic, age, ability or other barriers might otherwise prevail” (Howarth and Quirke, 2016, p. 2). Through storytelling and having conversations about our and others’ personal, sentimental belongings, we are able to understand more about those around us and form bonds on a deeper level than strictly through conversation alone.

Additionally, we are able to understand things about ourselves through telling these stories: “an individual invests meaning into his or her memento, telling stories about it which are, ultimately, narratives about the self” (Howarth and Quirke, 2016, p. 2). This investment of meaning allows for stories to be told through these objects, and at a certain point, without any words necessary. The owner can simply look at the belonging and understand things about themselves, with others they are more than happy to recount the stories. Howarth and Quirke go on to say that “a “self-told life” should be interpreted “not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a non-existent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience” wherein, “we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives”” (2016, p. 3). By simply owning these sentimental belongings and discussing them with loved ones and visitors, individuals construct a sense of themselves; and it is through this construction, interpretation, narration, and constantly retelling of stories that we become the stories that we tell. And this the person that we have thus constructed, is intertwined with the objects that serve as repositories and as prompts for these stories.

⁴An interesting example of this is in communities in Borneo who, for centuries, would pass down large stoneware jars within their families and these were treasured heirlooms. With the rise of tourism and modernization many families are selling these jars to tourists and antique dealers to raise funds to modernize their lives (Lillios, 1999).

Memory Transmission Through Objects

There is an excellent example of this type of memory transmission that comes out of Theresienstadt concentration camp between 1942 and 1944. A group of women prisoners got together and wrote down, from memory, recipes that they used to prepare all the time before the war, this project formed a little recipe book. “Many of them had inherited these recipes from their mothers, and in writing them down, they used them not only to remember happier times or to whet their mouths through recollection but—more importantly—as a bequest addressed to future generations of women” (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006, p. 354). This type of object reaches both back into the past and forward into the future. These women were remembering knowledge and recipes that had been instilled into them along with memories of cooking with their mothers or other relatives and, through this book, passing them on to a new generation of women with the addition of memories of the Holocaust and their treatment while in a concentration camp. Receiving an object such as this connects the new owner to the history of their family as well as shedding some light on their parents’ experiences. “Such remnants carry memory traces from the past, to be sure, but they also embody the very process of its transmission” (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006, p. 355). As family members die and those with lived experiences of the things (and stories) we want to remember are no longer with us, we have to increasingly scrutinize these objects which are supposed to transfer memories and culture to us, but which in the absence of those stories become increasingly opaque in their signification. If we subject such objects such as this to an informed, probing reading, the material object could serve as a “testimonial object” allowing us to critically question the past as well as how the past comes down to us in the present (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006). Objects allow us to remember, and also to interrogate how we’re able to remember these things in the first place, how memories are formed and maintained, and how they might be transmitted to the next generation.

Narrative Quality of Objects

Belongings and storytelling are intrinsically linked: you cannot ask someone about something they own, of personal significance, without eliciting at least a brief story about its origin or an interesting feature. When studying domestic objects in Indonesia, Janet Hoskins found that she “could not collect the histories of objects and the life histories of persons separately. People and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined that they could not be disentangled” (1998, p. 2). She found that when asking someone to tell her about themselves, she usually got a list of accolades or children’s names; but when she inquired about domestic objects, she gained a rich understanding of that individual and their approach to life. “The stories generated around objects provide a distanced form of introspection...a form of reflection on the meaning of one’s own life” (Hoskins, 1998, p. 2). These objects, with their imbued memory and significance, are termed by Hoskins ‘biographical objects’: they “share our lives with us, and if they gradually deteriorate and fade with the years, we recognize our own aging in the mirror of our possessions” (Hoskins, 1998, p. 8). These biographical belongings are the ones we use to tell the stories of our lives.

We can look here to other cultural traditions for instances where objects themselves become the story woven through their history: those North American Indigenous communities who produced Wampum belts, for instance, took the narratives embodied in these objects as forming legal agreements, outlining particular arrangements with neighbouring communities and newcomers. When the Dutch entered Haudenosaune territory in 1613, they came to an agreement that stipulated that they would live in friendship and peace with each other forever. The Dutch recorded this agreement on a piece of paper, but the Haudenosaune did not use paper to record their history and agreements; instead, they created a Wampum belt made from white and purple wampum shells, representing the Dutch and the Haudenosaune living alongside each other and respecting one another. To this day, “the Haudenosaune see the Two Row Wampum as a living treaty; a way

that they have established for their people to live together in peace; that each nation will respect the ways of the other as they meet to discuss solutions to the issues that come before them” (Onondaga Nation, 2021). The Wampum belt has all of this significance, meaning, memory, and agreement literally woven into it, it is, in essence, a treaty document would be in another society.

A study was conducted in 2018 called The EMOTIVE Project that looked at the connection between storytelling, tangible things, and emotional responses in visitors in a gallery or museum setting. The organizers found, in this so-far limited study, that objects are rich with stories and emotion and in a museum setting you have to work a little harder to break through traditional constructs of viewing objects and understanding to allow visitors to truly connect with these objects that they’re seeing for, potentially, the first time. As demonstrated with Sarah’s shoes from her grandparents that her friend convinced her to donate, things that aren’t ours can be difficult to connect with on a deep level right away, but this project strives to create connections between people and items that are new to them, this new empathy for objects, along with the framework developed in this MRP, could assist organization companies when helping clients declutter or move in the future.

In every interview I conducted, storytelling featured prominently. Participants told me stories from their childhoods, stories about their parents, friends, loved ones, stories about past travels and good memories, stories about their lives. With each interview, I learned a little more about that individual person but also about the power and influence that so-called ‘ordinary’ objects have over us and our lives. Without these belongings, we would at least not be thinking as much, or as well, about memories and people; at worst, we would be losing links to previous times, places, people, and lifetimes of memories. Helen, in our interview, told me about a time when her family was moving into a new house and her oldest son was 12. They arrived at the house and she handed her four sons their childhood teddy bears. “When I gave [my son] his teddy bear one of the other kids tried to take it and [my son] just leaped at [my other son] and grabbed that teddy bear and was totally without thinking about it. And I thought, this is how things get engrained in your mind and you love them to death” (Helen, personal interview, October 28, 2021). We can see that her son was deeply attached to this childhood toy; and even though he was 12 years old, he still instinctively wanted to protect it from harm. Helen also enjoyed relaying this story and reliving this memory of her sons as boys, now that they are grown up and have families of their own.

Another example is Greg’s story about his china cabinet, made by his father’s grandfather. He kept his china inside and when he met his partner she added her china pattern to the collection. “The first time that [my partner’s] parents and my parents came to dinner, it was funny because [my partner] gave her family her china and my family my china and it wasn’t until like almost through dinner that people noticed, hey I have different china than you!” (Greg, personal interview, October 27, 2021). Greg was laughing while telling this story and was having fun remembering how this cabinet has been in his life for all of these small moments, presenting opportunities such as this to share stories; in order to tell the story of the china, he first must explain the history of the cabinet and its significance, which is a nice experience for him.

Gillian went to boarding school in England and developed very close friendships with a set of twins, with whom she remains in close contact to this day. They both still live in the UK and when she goes over to visit it is difficult to see them both at once due to busy schedules, however, one time they were able to all three get together in Gillian’s parent’s house, where the clock (her selected belonging) was. One of the twins “brought a photograph of us when we were super awkwardly 14 maybe...under the clock. So, we recreated the picture, and I just I love it. It was just so cute” (Gillian, personal interview, October 22, 2021). This clock is something that persisted throughout their friendship and recounting this story to me felt so warm and personal like a window into the relationships between these three girls as they grew up and created lives for themselves but never fell out of touch.

Finally, Sarah, speaking about her geodes recounted to me the story of how she first acquired them. She was at a festival in Columbus, Ohio with a friend, they weren’t very close at the time, but they were both in the same place that summer and wanted to go together. They came across a man offering for people to split open rocks and find

whatever was inside, so they decided to do it and then each took half of both rocks that were split. Building on this, she told me about how this friend ended up meeting his now-fiancé: “we were all separate, mutual friends, and they met at my [21st] birthday party and now they’re getting married” (Sarah, personal interview, October 19, 2021). Stories can tease out these connections in peoples’ lives; in Sarah’s case, she became closer with this friend through the experience of obtaining the geodes, as a result of which friendship he ended up meeting his fiancée; and today, her halves of the geodes are more than a prompt, they are where this story resides.

Stories are a way in which we move through the world and relay important information to others; they are also how the owners of these objects make sense of their significance. These belongings remind them of important people, events, or time periods in their lives and talking through these belongings can be easier than just trying to tell someone about a recollection. There are situations where objects mostly are meaningful to their owners for functional reasons; but even in such cases, they are not free from stories being told about them. In one interview I conducted for this project, Janet discussed her dining table which had belonged to her grandparents when her father was growing up (Appendix G). When I asked her where the meaning comes from for her with this table she replied “I think it’s more because of the function of it. I look at it and go it’s a great table, why would I get rid of it, it’s got these four leaves, you can work around the ends of the table to make it seat more...I’ve got a perfectly good table, why would I get rid of it?” (Janet, personal interview, October 26, 2021). On the surface this emphasis on practicality seems to avoid larger significations; but in telling me about the functionality she also started telling me about her memories of hosting people and how this flexible table allowed her to do so with ease. “When I lived in New Mexico at Thanksgiving because I got to do a big thanksgiving dinner party, I would do it on Canadian Thanksgiving, and that was a big deal” (Janet, personal interview, October 26, 2021); “when we hosted [my partner’s] family for Christmas a couple of times, we were able to use that huge table and then extend a big folding table and turn the whole living room/dining room into one big eating table and at our peak, if everyone was there, we would have had 22 and the most we had was 20” (Janet, personal interview, October 26, 2021). These are two examples of stories that she relayed to me, all while explaining that her attachment to the table was purely functional as opposed to emotional. Even when an object is important to an individual for its functional capacity, it cannot be discussed without evoking the memories that have been formed as a result of the function of that object. Objects still allow for narratives to be formed in situations like this, even if their stories remain largely unconscious or dormant until the right prompting occurs.

4.1 SYNTHESIS

INTERVIEW LEARNINGS

Interview Learnings

Over the course of the ten interviews that I conducted for this MRP, a number of common themes, insights, and learnings coalesced that helped shape and inform the final framework recommendations. Below, I outline these insights and provide at least one example from the interviews to demonstrate the feedback I received.

People Want to Feel Control Over Where Their Belongings Go

I heard this from many different people in the interview process. Individuals feel emotional attachments to their belongings and want to know that if they must pass them on, that these things will be well cared for: therefore, it is important (and can help bring a sense of peace to this process) to know exactly where their things are going and who will be taking care of them moving forward. In my interview with Gillian, she discussed the clock that had always hung in her parents' kitchen, wherever they moved. She brought it back to Canada with her from her parents' farm in England. She noted that she would have liked to have given it away:

Given the circumstances of where my parents were, they had lived there for 50 years, the farm was a very open house so there were constantly people coming and going, it was a very rural community the door was always open. So, there were any number of people honestly that I would have given that clock to and they would have appreciated it. Not for its ancient history but for the 50 years that it was there. And I did that with a lot of random stuff, I encouraged people to come in and pick things and not feel weird about it (Gillian, personal interview, October 22, 2021).

Had the clock have gone to someone else from the village surrounding her parents' farm, she would have felt comfortable with this sense of continuity because the next owner would have some sense of its past. Since no one took it during the period where people were welcome to come by and pick an item to take home, Gillian kept the clock for herself, rather than see it go to a stranger who would not properly appreciate it.

People Want to Feel Control Over Where Their Belongings Go

Having control over where their precious belongings are going next, isn't always enough. Some owners also want to ensure that the belongings will be cherished and appreciated by their next owners, as they themselves have cherished and cared for these things. Liz, one of the interview participants, took the step of reclaiming belongings that she felt were underappreciated by their new owners:

It was two paintings that a deceased relative painted, and I passed them on to a son-in-law. Because of his heritage, I thought it would be relevant and I thought it would be very special for them. And it wasn't. They weren't. And they ended up on the floor in a back room somewhere. Never hung. I gave them three years to hang them. And then on a visit out to their place, I said okay, I've noticed that these aren't being hung, I'll take them home with me when I go next week. So, I took them home and I've hung them and I'm going to pass them on to a friend who has that heritage in her background and is delighted to get them (Liz, personal interview, October 29, 2021).

This story is unusual because many people would not take the action that Liz did, to 'repossess' the belongings that she had decided to pass down to her son-in-law. However, she explained, "I felt honoured that they were passed onto me and I felt I let [the painter of the two works] down by not having them honoured in my daughter's home. But then I felt as if I re-established myself, by reclaiming them" (Liz, personal interview, October 29, 2021). In these statements, Liz demonstrates the importance of

ensuring that precious belongings will be properly honoured and appreciated in their new homes. As these belongings can become almost a proxy for a person, a relationship, or a memory, it can be very painful when they are seen not to be treated in the way the previous owner had intended. The fact that she reclaimed these belongings after passing them on will strike some readers as extreme – but it underscores the importance for givers of ensuring that the recipient of your belongings genuinely wants them, and will appreciate them as you do. Liz decided to pass them to a family friend who has already expressed excitement and delight at being the recipient, and this has made her feel much happier and more at peace with the decision.

People Want to Impart the Significance of the Belonging Along with its History and Sentimental Value to the New Owner

This goes hand-in-hand with ensuring that the new owner appropriately appreciates the belonging. There is a strong sense that a knowledge of the history of the belonging, related in some way as it is passed along to its recipient, is a prerequisite to the new owner properly understanding its value and cherishing it. This might include any information about the original owner, how it has been passed down through a family, any stories about its history and memories tied to it, and what it means to the current owner. Emma, when explaining how she would pass along her statue of Osiris to a new owner (should she decide to do so), said:

I'd probably go all out because I'm weird like that. It's almost a reminder for me to ask my dad and my aunt and uncle more about my grandparents; whatever prompted me to give it away would make me make good on that and learn more so that I could pass that along [with the belonging]. Like, why did they buy this? Why were they there? Why did they like it so much? Then I would probably also be interested in like pinpointing as well as I could when they would have gotten it...I'd be able to figure out when they would have gone and maybe even found pictures of the exhibition and the gift shop even. So, I would enjoy doing that research and because I have specific information about it, I would want them to know, but I think [even] more to just give context about who my grandparents were, and why they were interested in it. And probably some dorky picture of me, aged 5, holding up a pyramid (Emma, personal interview, October 26, 2021).

In short, Emma would take the opportunity of passing this special belonging down to really inspire her to do the research about it that she has been interested in as long as she has owned it but has put off until now. In passing it along to a new owner, she would want to include all of this rich detail, history, and stories from both her grandparents' life but also her own with the statue, in order to convey its value and significance to its next owner.

People Want the Belonging to Live On, as well as the Memories or Stories Associated with It

As important as it is for the new owner of the object to understand its history, it is also critical to understand that this transition of ownership is not the end of its story. This is the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the belonging, something that the giver as well as the receiver of the belonging should understand. It can be difficult for the previous owner to think about the belonging's new life without them, but it is important that, when giving something away, the owner remembers and honours this as a step in the continuing story of the belonging; facilitating this acknowledgement is crucial to enabling and easing the transfer. About this, Jordan said of her grandmother's bell:

[I would want to pass the bell] on in such a way that at least for the time that the object is in my hands, I kind of shape the story around it for the next person. Or be part of the object's story moving forward...if they build a different relationship to it, that's fine. It becomes more of a, for me like the relationship to the person, and [acknowledging that] this is a significant moment in our relationship, because I'm giving you this gift because it's important to me (Jordan, personal interview, November 1, 2021).

This understanding of continuity, that you are only one chapter in the story of the belonging, is going to make it easier to part with a significant belonging; I suggest that having this in place may even lessen a sense of rigidity around where it goes next, or what it is used for once received by its new owner. For the interview participants, control over who received the object, and control over shaping and communicating the story of its history to date and its personal importance to them, seem in some way to be in service of this: that knowing the new owner has all the information they need to continue honouring this belonging while incorporating it into their life in a unique way and making some new memories with it. In short, building on its history to date, and extending and adding to this into the future.

People Want to Feel Supported, but not Pressured to Give Things Away

Support, in the form of someone to help you make decisions about what to keep and what to part with, can be crucial when moving or downsizing (something that was noted by Jenny in our interview). However, it is important that this support be of a kind that feels truly open, listening to the owner's wants and needs, instead of pressuring them to part with belongings for the sake of an easier move or a clean slate in their new home. Jenny discussed how she was able to finally part with the sign from her father's memorial that had a photo of him on it.

I think up until the time I actually moved, I was like, "is it blasphemy to get rid of this?" I felt like the fact that it goes in the garbage, there was something that felt not very good about that...I had someone helping to organize and she wasn't going to have any say about what I was going to do with that because it's a picture of my dad. But when I was in clearing mode, I was like, what am I going to do with this, and I just made the decision. So, I think the fact that there was actually someone with me and I wasn't even connected to her – she was the mover who was helping me organize – made it easier for me just to say this is going, this is going, this is going etc. So, this is another bridge to make it easier, really, because she was responsible for organizing everything that I was getting rid of, so it was almost even less direct for me to toss it out or pass it on (Jenny, personal interview, November 1, 2021).

Having the support of another person, especially someone who is not connected to the belonging in question, was pivotal for Jenny to be able to finally release this poster that she has been holding onto for five years. It also removed the responsibility from her shoulders of actually carrying out the final act of disposing of it. This buffer person, present to support Jenny and then carry out her wishes, was instrumental in Jenny's parting peacefully with this item. Conversely, Sarah – who told me about getting rid of a pair of shoes that her grandparents had purchased for her, a decision she now regrets – was also with a friend that day who was helping her, but not in the same way.

There was a time I'm sure where I was like, I have to get rid of some clothes, got to clear out my closet. And I believe one of my friends was with me and she [said] you never wear these, you've got to get rid of them. And I [thought] that's probably true, somebody else could get more use out of them, fine...She was always trying to get me to clean out my stuff...But for some reason now I want these shoes that I don't wear, just to have them (Sarah, personal interview, October 19, 2021).

This shows why it is important to distinguish between merely having someone with you while you clean out a closet or a house for moving, and having someone there to truly help and support your decisions, but without influencing you directly. It can be difficult not to project our own thoughts and feelings on another person about what they should keep and what they should get rid of, especially if we know them well. When seeking support, it is critical to differentiate between these two types of people, in order to get help that is free from influence or judgement.

People Sometimes Regret Having Gotten Rid of Belongings

In most cases, giving away belongings or passing them on to others is final; regrets over having gotten rid of these things may emerge, and give rise to guilt, resentment, or anguish. While there is in most cases not a way to undo these decisions, it is important to frame this pain and regret as a learning opportunity, a chance to examine our process for letting things go and thinking more critically the next time that we do this. Jordan described a vest that she had purchased at a vintage store and that she loved but when cleaning out her closet years later she ended up selling it as she wasn't wearing it very often. She now misses it and wishes that she hadn't parted with it so easily. "I think about that now, because I like to cycle out clothes and I sell vintage clothes too, but I think about that now, like, [when faced with similar decisions] is this something that in 10 years I'm going to wish I had hung onto?...It's definitely influenced the kind of dialogue I have with myself around when I want to sell something or depart from something" (Jordan, personal interview, November 1, 2021). Thus, although regret can be painful, Jordan also allowed it to inform her process when she henceforth wants to get rid of things. Asking some simple questions, and even recalling past regrets, can help minimize the number of things that are let go and later regretted or mourned.

4.2 SYNTHESIS FRAMEWORK

Using the primary and secondary research conducted over the course of this project and building on the insights described in the preceding section, I have developed the following framework to facilitate the decision surrounding letting go of a significant belonging, and then actually parting with it in the most peaceful way possible. I developed the following questionnaire to facilitate this process during a downsizing or moving event where an individual finds themselves faced with the task of releasing belongings into new hands. These recommendations are predicated on the following assumptions:

- That the individual in question is going through a move or a decluttering process
- That non-significant objects, i.e., the things that are not painful to part with, have already been donated or given away or disposed of.

This framework is only concerned with the decision-making process surrounding the retention or passing-on of precious belongings, those that have memories and stories attached to them.

Step 1: Recruit a Support System

This doesn't have to be a paid professional as in Jenny's example, but this person (or persons) must be supportive of you and your decisions, facilitating your disposal or retention of objects, but not actively influencing your decision. Their role is to help you with the stages of this process that are difficult for you, *once the decision has been made*: for instance, physically placing the belonging in the donation bin or on the curb. This person should not be pressuring you to dispose of something simply for the sake of having fewer possessions.

Step 2: Create a Generous Timeline

I have learned throughout this process that getting rid of sentimental belongings is something that takes much consideration and thought, if the decision is to feel solid and correct and regrets are to be minimized. Starting to sort through belongings and making some piles of things to keep, things to part with, and things to think about, early in the process, will provide you with enough time to really think about your belongings and how parting with them would make you feel.

Step 3: Identify Belongings to Potentially Part With

After giving the belongings some thought, identify the ones that are sentimental but may have to be parted with. Putting them somewhere separate from other possessions can help them not be disposed of accidentally, and will allow you to sit with them and contemplate your next steps. For example, Jenny knew that she didn't want to keep the poster from her father's memorial when she received it but took it home because she didn't know what else to do with it at the time. She placed it in her basement for years before getting rid of it while moving. Although she knew that she didn't want to keep it she still saw it on occasion when she went into the basement but having it separate from her other images and memories of her dad validated the fact that she no longer needed it and helped her finally make the decision to part with it.

Step 4: Ask the Questions

Once you have identified the significant, sentimental belongings that you either want or need to part with, it is important to ask yourself questions and be honest in your answers. Drawing inspiration from Jordan's experience of regret in selling a beloved vest, and her current practice of asking herself if she thinks that an item of clothing is something she could see herself wearing in 10 years before she sells it, these questions can both serve as a check on impulsive decisions and a means of exploring the nature of your relationship to this belonging before making your final decision. To each of the statements below please score yourself as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree:

1. This is a belonging I cherish
2. Giving this to a person who knows its story and has committed to appreciating it would make the transition more peaceful for me
3. Knowing where this belonging is going, would be comforting to me
4. Someone expressing interest in this belonging and having similar values and thoughts about it as me would make the transition more peaceful
5. This belonging does not represent my only connection to a loved one
6. There are other ways for this connection or relationship to be preserved, even if the belonging is no longer present
7. Writing down or otherwise documenting the belonging's history and narrative for both myself and the new owner would make me comfortable parting with it
8. There are memories or stories attached to this belonging that would survive without the physical reminder
9. I would not worry about this belonging once it left my ownership
10. 10 years from now, I will not regret giving this object away

If you responded with mostly strongly agree, agree, or neutral then congratulations! You are ready to peacefully and conscientiously part with this belonging, ensuring that it makes its way into good hands for its next chapter, continue following this framework for more guidance on next steps. If you responded with mostly disagree or strongly disagree, you may not be ready to part with this object yet.

These questions can help respondents frame the inalienable nature of the belonging in their lives, as well as help them to imagine other possibilities for preserving substantial memories and connections beyond their continued possession of this thing. Ultimately, if the circumstances whereby you could become comfortable parting with a belonging are attainable, and you feel that the memories or connections, stories inherent in the object can be preserved in other ways, you may be ready to facilitate the transmission of this belonging to its new home.

Next Steps (once the decision has been arrived at to give away the belonging):

Write Down or Document the Belonging’s Story

Once a decision has been made to part with a precious belonging, document the object’s story: its provenance, the history of your acquisition of it, its connection to your life, to others, and its significance to you. Whether you write down memories and stories associated with this belonging, or make an audio/video recording of yourself recounting them, it is therapeutic to reminisce on these precious belongings and remember the stories, relationships, and memories embedded into them. As we have seen, the potential to communicate these stories also fulfills the need of owners to feel that the person receiving the object can appreciate it, since they now have a context for understanding its history and prior significance; it can also help owners preserve the significance of the object, without actually keeping the object itself. This also highlights the iterative nature of this framework: at this stage, the process of telling the object’s story can impact the decision being made. In telling the story of the belonging, individuals may decide they need to keep it after all; alternatively, the lack of a story emerging from this process might lead them to realize that they weren’t as attached to it as they had thought. Should the decision still be made to part ways with the belonging, documenting the story can maintain this bridge between you and your belonging; at the same time, passing this information on to the recipient of the belonging will serve to further their understanding of its value, and inform their relationship with it moving forward. This satisfies the insight derived from the interviews, namely that owners want their belongings to live on with their history and stories attached, while also allowing them to continue their narrative journey with someone else.

Photograph the Belonging

Once you have made the decision to part with the physical belonging, photograph it, in the place where it lived in your home; this can serve as a proxy for a now-absent object, but also a prompt to remember it as it was. Attach this photograph to the narrative written about it, either digitally storing them together or physically fixing the photograph to the paper where the story is written. These two items can more easily come with you to your next dwelling and serve as a happy reminder of the belonging.

⁷In some cases, this may precede or facilitate the decision to part with a belonging. Emma, for example said that she would be comfortable giving away her statue if there was a young person in her life who had the same natural curiosity and love of learning instilled in her and would appreciate it properly.

Identify a Recipient

If the decision has been made to pass along this belonging, to someone, it is time to select a recipient, if this has not already happened⁷. In most cases, interviewees felt most comfortable passing their belongings to a family member or a close family friend – someone whom they know will cherish this belonging and provide it with a positive next chapter. Should no one in your family or friend network be interested, or seem a suitable recipient, it may be time to look into donation options (such as a thrift store, charitable organization, or collection effort). Knowing that this belonging could go on to help someone else, or make them happy, can be an extremely comforting thought.

Pass On the Belonging in a Positive and Peaceful Way

When the time comes to actually hand over the belonging to another person, do this with as positive an outlook as possible. Do not tell them how much you will miss it, or that you’re sad to be parting with it, instead impart the stories that you wrote down or otherwise recorded about it, tell them how significant it has been over the course of your owning it, and how hopeful you are that they will appreciate it and love it as much as you have. This will allow the other person to understand the gravity of this gift and treasure it as an act of love.

Have a Frank Conversation with the Intended Recipient

As discussed in Liz’s situation, sometimes things are handed over to family members or friends and then we see that they are not being treated in the way that we would want. Her story provides a good reminder that frank conversations should be had with the intended recipient to ensure that they want the belonging that you’re offering, and they are not just accepting it out of a sense of obligation. Through this kind of conversation, you will be able to avoid Liz’s outcome and feel comfortable placing your belonging into new hands knowing that the new owner will care for it and appreciate it properly.

If Donating or Throwing Away, Ask a Helper to Dispose of it For You

Finally, if no one in your family or friend circle is interested in taking on this belonging, it is time to part with it – either through donating it or disposing of it. Once the decision has been made to part with an item in this sense, it can be helpful to ask a support person to undertake the final act of taking away or disposing of the belonging. Even if you have consciously made the decision to rid yourself of something, this final act can still be painful; having this person be a buffer to create some distance between you and the final parting with the belonging, can ultimately ease this process and minimize stress.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In a 2019 TED talk, the designer and RISD professor Tom Weis describes an instance when he was invited to a nuclear summit with senior figures in U.S. national security. As the creative person who was helping to facilitate the summit, he understood that it was his responsibility to approach it in a different, creative way. Since they would be discussing the future, he decided to send each participant a box ahead of the summit in which they were to place a gift to 2045, the 100-year anniversary of the USA dropping the first atomic bomb. Initially he was concerned because there were people at this summit with vastly different points of view and thoughts about how to move forward with national security, but he found that “as soon as they were able to share their boxes and tell their stories those titles seemed to fade away. Pretty soon we were all just human... All of these different perspectives are talking about not what divides us but what we have in common” (Weis, 2019). The objects they brought ranged from a Black Lives Matter t-shirt to a piece of the Berlin Wall to a pair of baby shoes. The objects themselves were not the main focus, Weis notes: it was more the realization that these objects, connected to narratives, have a power to bring people together and unify them around a shared humanity and an interest in future generations. He closed his talk by saying,

I tell my students, if you have an idea that you want to talk about don't come empty-handed, come with a thing. Starting with the thing allowed national security experts to focus on not what was different but what we had in common about our future. Starting with the thing allowed teenagers to talk about stereotypes and assumptions...So the next time you're faced with that proverbial blank page, or you want to share a new idea...take that small little risk, select a meaningful object, start your story (Weis, 2019).

Objects unify us; they allow us to express things that perhaps we wouldn't be able to otherwise communicate; in their very materiality they provide a basis for self-understanding, for the preservation and transferral of values and memories, and for the sense of a future extending beyond our limited lifespan.

The objective of this project was to answer the following research questions: *What is the connection between personal objects and memory? How might we use storytelling to access, preserve, and share these stored memories? Could a framework be developed to allow for these stories to be shared, ensuring the object that is passed on retains something of its narrative or sentimental value, minimizes a sense of loss on the part of the original owner?*

This project involved a thorough process of primary and secondary research to understand the nature of human beings' emotional connections to their sentimental belongings, and to see how storytelling might help to both nurture these connections and facilitate the transfer of these belongings. The learnings and insights gained from this research translated into the framework outlined above, which I suggest can assist anyone, at any age, who is faced with the daunting task of parting with some of their most sentimental, precious belongings.

Human beings form deep, lifelong connections with objects; these connections can cause these precious things to become inalienable, either to an individual or a family (as heirlooms), representing persons and relationships for generations to come. The study of our relationships to these belongings reveals the depth of these connections – something that is often disregarded in discussions about the process of downsizing, decluttering, or handing over personal objects. With this research, I am intervening on the part of the individual faced with the daunting task of getting rid of their belongings. This moment is part of almost everyone's life; and given that we have such a deep connection to our belongings, it is critical that we find a better way to make decisions about them when faced with the task of passing them on. While we cannot control what ultimately happens to these belongings, we can control this moment of transition. Establishing a clear framework and pathway for decision-making, for the passing along of objects, the recording and communication of stories, documentation, and in some cases, disposal, can help ease this transition and preserve a continuity of 'specialness' around these belongings.

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References

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References

7.0 APPENDICES

Appendix A: Author's Bowl of Rocks



[Note: not all objects discussed in interviews were able to be photographed and included here]

Appendix B: Metal Sculpture of Egyptian God Osiris
[Interview Subject: Emma]



Appendix C: Grandmother's Bell and Photo
[Interview Subject: Jordan]



Appendix D: Wilfred the Walrus

[Interview Subject: Margaret]



Appendix E: Kitchen Clock

[Interview Subject: Gillian]



Appendix F: Geodes

[Interview Subject: Sarah]



Appendix G: Grandparents' Dining Table

[Interview Subject: Janet]



