

Acquiring Environmental Knowledge and Meaning

A Preliminary Study of the Process of Object Meaning

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Abstract

The social psychological significance of everyday objects has been shown in much literature. However, how objects get meanings and how meanings transform in the process of person-object transaction are still not well articulated. This paper aims to fill this gap. Acquiring, associating, perceiving, knowing, making, and self-presenting are proposed as ways of attaching meanings to personal objects. The spatial and temporal context of object meanings are also mentioned. It is suggested that this study can inform inquiry about person-object transactions.

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The social psychological significance of everyday objects has been shown in much literature. However, how objects get meanings and how meanings transform in the process of person-object transaction are still not well articulated. This paper aims to fill this gap.

Sociological studies about objects are confined to the symbolization of social status (e.g., Laumann & House, 1970). Possession and use of objects is correlated with social-economic status and social-political attributes. Most studies are descriptive. The upper and middle classes are revealed as bearers of objects. Their political strategies of the manipulation of signification systems are concealed. However, some researchers (Duncan & Duncan, 1976a; Pratt, 1982) propose that the *nouveaux riches* or people with higher social mobility change their consumption patterns more frequently to express their identities.

Most studies of cherished objects (e.g., Hansen & Altman, 1976; Kalymun, 1983; Millard & Smith, 1981) demonstrate a correlation of two independent variables, (1) environment—possessions; and (2) behavior—satisfaction, adjustment, or decision. This approach leaves out the possibility of qualitative changes of object meanings and the context in which they are situated. Hormuth (1990) proposes an ecological model of self which is seen as a conjunction of other people, environments, and objects. Using a multi-method, multi-study approach, he takes relocation as a research paradigm to study the meaning of the physical environment in relation to self-concept change. However, his empirical research does not transcend the traditional correlational approach (Speller, 1991). Wapner's organismic-developmental approach (Wapner, 1981, 1987; Wapner, Kaplan, &

Cohen, 1973) considers the person-in-environment as the unit of analysis. His theory emphasizes that people seek to make sense out of their surroundings and to define and locate themselves with respect to these surroundings. People are seen as continuously organizing and endowing their environments with significance, and assessing their own places in the environment thus structured. The same problem with Hormuth, in his empirical study (Wapner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990) object phenomenon is reduced to quantitative correlation between cherished possessions and adaptation.

The Meaning of Things (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) deals with the dynamics of objects and family life; *Special Objects* (Oury, 1987) mentions the transition and transformation of meanings of objects, but in both instances description and categorization of objects form the major analyses. Some research on transition (e.g., Kalymun, 1983) deals with relocation as a single event rather than a process of adaptation to a new place. In Myers's study (1985), the significance of special possessions in a life span was studied. However, the results were based on retrospective data. The person's life context in relation to special possessions could have been made more explicit as well. How people assign meanings to their personal objects will be the focus of this paper. The following data are mostly based on a longitudinal study in which thirty-five Taiwanese students were interviewed before and after they came to the United States to study.

We are born into a meaningful world. Each everyday object in this world has its meanings which are socially and culturally defined. However, an individual can endow an object with personal meaning in this social/cultural context. This paper does not focus on the social/cultural history of objects (e.g., Appadurai, 1986; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Sahlins, 1976). Rather, I mainly deal with the personal psychological meanings of everyday objects. There are different relationships between a person and an object. If we put it on a continuum, indifference represents one pole and embodiment another pole. Of course, a person could simply accept the meaning of an object by its socially and culturally defined function. There is no "personal touch" placed on these objects. They are only a tool or a means to an end. At this pole, people are concerned about their project without paying attention to an object. For instance, for the author, the typewriter at school is only a functional object. I do not attach any personal meaning to it except its function. The pen and a piece of paper on my desk can be replaced by others without making any difference to me so long as they function. The object's location in a spatial context is not particularly important if I can reach it easily when I need it for my project. It is no longer significant if I discard my project. However, a purely functional object, such as a desk, could acquire psychological significance if it is given by my friend, if it belongs to a particular style, if it is personally made, or if it accompanies me while I am writing my dissertation.

On the other pole of this continuum of person-object relationship is that in which the person and object become one. In this case, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between the person and the object. I will use an excerpt of a conversation to illustrate a woman's object experiences. She had a stuffed cat called MM since her childhood. One day I asked her: "Why don't you like Macintosh?" She answered: "MM doesn't like the mouse." This was a spontaneous response. It was not her deliberate analogy. Rather, it was difficult to identify who was doing the talking: she or her stuffed cat. The unification of the person and the object is similar to that identified in an athlete's experience called flow. "One rock climber remarks, 'You are so involved in what you are doing you aren't thinking of yourself as separate from the immediate activity. . . . You don't see yourself as separate from what you are doing'" (quoted in Dreyfus, 1991, p. 66).

We are born into a socially and culturally meaningful world. Beyond this, we can endow an object with personal meaning in this context. There are different ways that people attach personal meaning to objects, from acquiring, associating, perceiving, knowing, and making to self-presenting. This categorical system exists only for its analytic purpose. Reader should keep in mind that these categories are not independent entities. Rather, they represent different dimensions in the process of object meanings.

1. **Acquiring.** The psychological significance of an object could originate mainly from acquisition of it. A tee shirt or a mug given by a person's beloved becomes special because it signifies the love and concern of the gift giver. People often receive a gift on a special occasion, such as a birthday, Christmas, or graduation. Therefore, the meaning of the gift may be enriched. It may signify a rite of passage and an entrance into a new world. So a bicycle received as a graduation present is not just a functional object. It signifies that the child can explore the outside world without supervision by her/his parents. An object handed down by a member of the older generation is also filled with meaning. It may remind people of their ancestors and parents and symbolize family continuity.

The psychic energy devoted to the process of object acquisition could also make an object special. For instance, the books that I found in a used bookstore in Boston where I spent a whole afternoon browsing for books from wall to wall have a special meaning for me. They are more precious than the new books which I bought in the bookstore on campus. Rewards or trophies are other objects whose significance is derived from the process of acquiring. For instance, a gold medal from a sports competition is a good tangible manifestation of a person's painstaking endeavor.

2. **Associating.** An object could acquire personal meaning for a person because of its association with people, places, events, or ideas. An object could become unique because of its association with a personally memorable experience. For example, a woman was listening to music on a rainy day. She enjoyed it very much. One day this music tape was broken. She then bought a new one. However, she was disappointed while she was listening to the new tape because the sound of rain was disappeared. This

incident shows that she attached the sound of rain to the original music tape as if the sound was inherent in the tape. Therefore, the tape became unique and irreplaceable for her.

People often associate an object with an experience in which the object is a part. Although the object may be mass-produced it then has new personal meaning, and it is distinctive from other objects. People may associate a letter with their friends, a souvenir with a place, an invitation card with their wedding ceremony and a motto with an idea. The association is not just cognitive—it may involve affect, emotions, or sensual experiences. The association is not passive or static. For instance, a family photo not only triggers people's recollection of past experiences but also fosters in them an appreciation of their families, or provides encouragement with them to work for their future. One person who had left her family was surprised by the similarity between the food cooked by herself and her mother. The food brought a feeling of intimacy to her. And she had a deeper understanding of their relationship through her interaction with the food.

Association is attached to an object through a temporal process. The temporal quality of an object could lead to a qualitative change of object meanings. A mug was purchased for functional reasons but becomes significant because it has survived for ten years. I possess other mugs having better quality and design. However, that mug is irreplaceable. This has something to do with habituation as well. For example, I cherish my pillow and blanket because I am so accustomed to them. Some Taiwanese students brought photographs to the United States and kept them in the same locations as they did in Taiwan. These photographs did not only establish the presence of their absent significant others but also maintain their body-environment relations. An object could also take on magic power because people performed well when they used it. Then they attributed a good performance to the object and it became a symbol of luck. An association with an object is not fixed. People may replace or accumulate new experiences in relation to this object. A Taiwanese student brought his favorite music compact discs to the United States. During the first semester, these discs were comforts for him in his difficult situation. However, he avoided listening to those compact discs during the second semester because he had associated his new, painful experiences during the first semester with these objects, and those memories were undesirable for his present project.

3. **Perceiving.** Recognition occurs when people interact with an object and interprets it only as something they already know. Perception, on the other hand, is an experience of learning through realizing the intrinsic qualities of an object (Dewey, 1934). Therefore, perception always occurs within a person's perspective, and the object has a meaning for this particular person. A stone may be just a natural object in the world. However, a person may endow it with personal meaning through perception. For instance, a woman cherished a stone not only because of association but also perception and imagination. One day one of her friends was strolling in a valley in the moonlight, picked up a stone, and sent it to her. This stone let the woman think

about her friend and her friend's experience in the valley. In addition to association, she perceived the stone from her own perspective. She liked its smoothness and simplicity. It was not a glittering ornament. She also liked the hardness of the stone which represented the quality of persistence and unyieldingness.

Two points should be stressed here. 1) There are different ways of perceiving, such as from a scientific or an aesthetic perspective. 2) Perceiving is both a process of a cultivation of a person's self and a process of the revealing of the qualities of the object. We can use a musical instrument for illustration. A person may perceive a violin as a work of art based on its material and design. Another person may acquire knowledge about it and appropriate it by playing it. Through playing the musical instrument, not only do people cultivate themselves, but the nature of the instrument is also realized. The instrument could become a part of the "body" of the person and they could be "in tune" with one another. A person's attachment to an object varies. A violin may simply be only a recreational tool like other sports equipment. An engineering major may cherish a violin because it symbolizes an important quality of the self in addition to her/his capability of doing an experiment.

4. **Making.** In the section on perceiving, I argue that people experience learning through realizing the intrinsic qualities of an object. In addition to perceiving, people also try to know an object by acquiring knowledge of it and its context. A person who cherishes a stuffed dolphin may study the life of the dolphin. A person who likes Van Gogh's painting may study his biography and the history of the Impressionism. Moreover, people make objects themselves. Therefore, these objects are not just objects for everyday use but also representations of their own work. There is a continuum between these objects and objects acquired through personal endeavor. But self-made objects are products in addition to signs of personal energy. In the process of making, the person's knowledge, labor, and imagination are objectified in the object, and the material nature of the object is realized. There are different levels of participation in the object in the process of making, ranging from assembling furniture, rearranging furniture at home, to designing and making furniture (using furniture as an example). The significance of the object depends upon how valuable or unique the person's skill or creativity is from a personal or social perspective and how well this object is made. The temporal dimension of object meanings is important too. A film major kept his films shot in his first semester. These films were not proofs of his endeavor in the present either for himself or for others. Rather, their significance resided in his future of being a successful director.

5. **Self-presenting.** In previous sections, I explain how people endow an object with personal meaning by acquiring, associating, perceiving, knowing, and making. Since we live in a social world, a person's identity construction is strengthened and enlarged by "social exchanges relating to the object, making it a possible topic or instrument to communication and exchange" (Boesch, 1991, p. 329). Some objects with socially shared qualities are likely to communicate the owner's self to others, such as

family photos, Christmas cards, or books. Some need more explanation in order to reveal the owner's self, such as a pen given as a birthday present or a key ring that a person used in college. People may want to reveal different parts of the self to different people in different situations. Therefore, the spatial position or display of objects depends upon the qualities of objects (to what extent this object transmits the person's self) and the social/physical environment (who is allowed to visit this environment and the relationship between this person and visitors). However, there are some objects whose major function involves the presentation of self to others. Their significance does not reside in the reflection of self by the intrinsic quality of the object itself. In another sense, we can say that people may use objects to present their desirable or false selves. Using conspicuous decor to compensate for one's failure of social mobility (Baudrillard, 1981) is an example. Other people use fake walkie-talkies or the cover of an encyclopedia to present an aspect of themselves that they don't have or that they desire to have. Gift-giving is another way of presenting the self (taste, values, or love) and endowing an object with personal meaning. A gift is meaningful to both the gift receiver and giver. A key ring or a mug in a store does not have personal significance. Once I have bought it as a gift, it has a special meaning to me. It carries my aesthetic values, appreciation of a social relationship, and my blessing with it.

Although this paper focuses on person-object relationships, it may be applied to other research problems in environmental psychology, such as the meaning of home or place attachment. We can postulate that place attachment results from the transactions between a person and a place in a larger social and cultural context. A person may endow a place with personal meaning through acquiring, associating, perceiving, knowing, making, or self-presenting as well. A place may be associated with positive or negative memories. The meaning of a place may not be constant. It may change over time according to people's present situation, future projection, and their interpretation of the past. This paper may inform further inquiry about the process of person-environment transaction.

Endnote

- 1 An Apple computer.

References

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