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MIRRORS & WINDOWS

Object attachment within the site of the domestic living
room

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requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at Massey
University

Abstract

This study addresses the inter-relationship of objects, self and society. Discussion is based upon original ethnographic information from the photographic documentation of eight living rooms and recorded interviews with their occupants.

The main concerns centre on what objects were selected, why they were chosen and the consequences of these selections for the participants.

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Mediation Process of Objects

Prologue

My first day at 'Grammar' school I remember very clearly. I was just a little over twelve years old. The school, situated on the edge of the 'green belt' and twelve miles west of London was, in the best British tradition, built of red brick on which ivy clung on every possible face.

Few of my friends from the junior school had made it through the 11+ selection examination. I faced, seemingly alone, a new school, a new class and new teachers, and I knew I was wearing 'baggy' short trousers. Uniform was an important aspect of the school and clearly reflected its maintenance of traditional educational values and procedures.

Not only were my trousers baggy, but they were made of a cheap, rough sort of material that rubbed the inside of my thighs - no one knew this except me, but everyone could see my trousers. I knew I would somehow be branded right from the very first day. I wanted to shout, "I, the real me, is not like these shorts - this is my mother you are seeing!" It would have made no difference, I was the shorts. No amount of 'verbal' telling appeared to change what people 'knew' of me. Perhaps words are too often involved in personal constructions which idealize or blatantly lie, and are quickly rejected for less transient and more concrete indications of a person. I never questioned how they knew, I didn't have to - it was my shorts. The cheap material and the poor cut said everything, or

at least that's how it appeared to me. I hated those trousers, they told lies about who I thought 'I' was.

On reflection, those awful first day trousers did, of course, tell about me. They did it though, without my permission, and they did not tell what I wanted them to say, but their telling was inescapable. Perhaps that is why I hated them so much.

I knew intuitively what others read and the classifications they drew were, in part, correct. You could not be a council estate child educated in a British grammar school in the 1960's without quickly realizing that every aspect of social categorization (class) depended not upon thoughts, academic ideas or sporting success, but rather on how they were done. Outward appearances were everything; clothes, accent, address, possessions, and style.

You were constructed according to the rules everyone so clearly knew and accepted. How we knew them I had no idea. I knew what was considered right and what was considered wrong and saw no reason to question.

What I wanted to do, by wearing smooth, close fitting grey flannel was to make a construction of myself that I thought appropriate, both in my eyes and in those of others. Perhaps I wanted to be something other than what I was. Whatever, I did not, with those trousers, feel in control of myself. My life since then, perhaps, can be seen as a struggle to wear the type of trousers I consider most appropriate.

To make a construction that I consider most appropriate, both for you and me, is no simple matter. My ideas of expression are limited by the paradigms available to me and your constructions of my expressions are quite likely not to be the same as mine. The hegemonic constraints to which I, more or less acquiesce, control my 'common sense'. Age, ethnicity, sex, religious orientation, geographical location, commitments to family, work and friends, together with aspirations for the future, all impinge on this internal 'me'.

Almost twenty five years ago when I was playing in a band, I wrote a blues song with the title 'Locked Inside Yourself'. One stanza in particular, still appears to have significance.

*Wandering through the pathways of your mind
Looking for a guide to help you through
You'll never find your way in there.
Seeing all the windows
Searching for a doorway
Round and round to nowhere, and
Now you know you're locked inside yourself.*

The picture conjured by the verse is one of peering out from inside, but never finding a doorway through which to step outside, turn around and look back at oneself. There being no doors works both ways - you can neither get out, nor can anyone else come in. To avoid the exile of being locked inside yourself, it is necessary to make external constructions which you deem appropriate, to construct some albeit imperfect reflection of self, for you and others.

One last, but important, piece of information about my background is that I am a photographer. I feel fortunate to have spent many years documenting the skills and traditions of others, in particular, the I-Kiribati of Micronesia. My work in relation to recording their material culture, constantly pointed up the significance of objects in their realization and expression as to who they were as a people. Objects also separated me from them. Not only did I often not have the skills to realize the object's utilitarian function but, more importantly, I rarely 'felt' the object as they did. My value of the object was intellectual and not from social experience. Even as a photographer, with little understanding of the discipline of anthropology, I sensed the vital implications of the symbolic nature of objects in the construction and maintenance of a social order.

The elements of this prologue are offered in the hope that they may provide an understanding of both my interest and orientation to the questions they raise; questions that are fundamental to my humanity and sharpened by my time spent in other cultures, in relation to: Who am I? How do I show myself to myself? How do I

construct myself for others? What stops me making the constructions I want? How do I go about reading the constructions of others?

INTRODUCTION

This introduction will provide an overview of the ideas and working processes involved in the compilation and analysis of the ethnographic material for this thesis. The areas covered are:

- Introduction:** the concepts of the thesis.
- Living Rooms:** their reason for selection as a point of focus.
- The Participants:** selection and involvement.
- The Documentary Process:** discussion regarding the three processes involved; observational writings, tape-recorded interviews, and photography.
- Reflexivity:** the inevitable role of personal interpretation in ethnography.

Introduction:

At its ethnographic origins, this study is simply an inventory, an inventory of objects of eight living rooms, and yet as Collier and Collier point out, '..... a cultural inventory can go beyond material items to a detailing of human functions, the quality of life and the nature of psychological well-being' (1986:45). The primary focus of this study is a search for an underpinning logic, by which the participants' object attachments may be understood. The discussion centres upon the inter-relationships of the participants, their objects and social context.

The study proposes that the inter-relationships that exist between these elements are dialectical and, therefore, each is a construction influenced by the other. In the following chapters, the ways in which the participants constitute their object attachments by attribution of meanings and the way in which these objects orientate the experiences and expressions of the participants, are explored. It will also be argued that self-recognition and self-definition are the primary and unavoidable results arising from object attachment and that their construction and interpretation is socially embedded.

Broadly speaking, the central issues of each chapter place a different emphasis upon the three elements of object, self and society. The pathway of discussion, arising from the ethnographic material in Chapter One, begins with the apparently clear exercising of personal choice in mnemonic structuring, concluding with the controlling implications of social structures.

Chapter Two examines the participants' universal use of objects as mnemonics. Object attachments will be seen to be important for sustaining memories of significant life-events and thereby providing continuity for the individual during his/her life. Objects as mnemonics also have the potential to maintain an inter-generational continuum of memories and values. Entrusting objects as carriers of important life-events is the single most important reason for object attachment recognized by the participants.

Chapter Three focuses upon the implications of object attachments in revealing a sense of 'self' to the participants. In the attachment to objects, boundaries between 'self' and 'other' can be established. 'Self', as a new and different territory, is not only signalled to others through object attachment but these differences, in turn, become part of the further influences in the constructions and development of the participant. It is argued that within the consistencies of object selection a personal coherence is established; a logic of expression of each participant's experience.

The fourth chapter develops the concept of society as a symbolic system. In this argument, objects are considered as an important part of such a system, both structuring and being structured by, society. The process of implicating objects in self-representation is inescapably connected to social structure for construction and interpretation.

Finally in Chapter Five, the separately analysed concepts within each of the preceding chapters are united within discussions of 'structure and agency' and 'world views'.

The study will, then, explore what objects have been selected by the participants, why they were chosen, and finally, how these objects operate in the roles to which they have been assigned within a social context. For the sake of analysis, the ultimately inseparable interaction of object, participant and society, will be teased apart until they are united again in the 'Final Discussion' of Chapter Five.

Living Rooms

There are few places in our daily lives where we have control over the selection of the objects that surround us. The criteria for the selection of objects which construct our surroundings will be driven by varying degrees of practical necessity and social appropriateness. At the factory, the work of production will almost exclusively dictate a functional orientation to the choice of objects and in the logic of their relationships. In areas of socializing or public relations, such as the hotel lobby, office reception areas and

so on, the selection process of objects is likely to include a strong component of a particular social, aesthetic expectation. Whatever the balance between functionality and matters of taste, the choices of objects are likely to have been made by someone else.

The home, though, is seen as an area where a greater degree of control can be exercised than is to be found in other areas of the environment. In fact, for the participants, the definition of home is synonymous with personal control. Without control, they designated the building a 'house'. The living room, in particular, appears to provide the least limitations of all for the establishing of personally coherent object groupings.

It is, then, to the living rooms of the participants that this study focuses its attention. It is within this part of their homes that we will best see the consistencies of object choice, that produce and define visual boundaries to the expressions of their experiences. It is from here that this study can explore the private attributions of their object attachments, the memories they maintain, the hopes and aspirations they embody, and the self-definition and self-recognition with which they are inescapably implicated.

Participants

The selection of the participants was comparatively random. No specific criteria were established. Instead, contacts were made primarily from suggestions offered by friends who knew of the focus of my study. I did, though, want to include a range of different people and to this end, there will be found among the participants, considerable variation in age, social and economic status, ethnicity, religious orientation as well as geographic location.

I had met one couple while photographing their daughter's wedding, during a previous ethnographic enquiry into ritual. Two other participants I knew from occasional meetings in relation to art and photography. The rest were complete strangers.

My first approach in all cases, was by telephone. I explained the purpose of my study as arising from my interest in the importance

and values people place upon their possessions and what they do with them by way of display and arrangement.

The participants were also told that the study would be limited primarily to objects within their living room. I also asked permission to tape record all interviews and to document, photographically, their possessions, arrangements, the location of their house and to take a portrait of them.

It should also be noted that in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants pseudonyms have been used throughout this study.

Ethnographic Documentation

Information for this thesis was gathered by three separate processes:

- a) personal observations, recorded in writing.
- b) tape recorded interviews
- c) photographic documentation

Personal Observations:

My writings describe my observations and my feelings during the time I spent with the participants, supported by selected comments from the participants' interviews. Such writing helps to extend the contextualization of other ethnographic material and clearly recognizes the inevitably reflexive situation of the ethnographer. Shifts in emphasis of the participants' ideas, objects or environments, in each description, to an extent reflect the participant's own emphasis within the interview.

Interviews:

The tape recorded interviews were important for three reasons. They;

- a) directed me toward those object attachments which were considered of particular importance by the participants.
- b) provided me with a description of the personal constructions with which the participants imbued certain objects.
- c) provided the opportunity for the participants to have a 'voice' within the study as to their view of themselves and their living room organization.

The questions (Appendix 1) were not used to provide a formal structure for the interview. Instead they existed as a 'check list' to ensure that similar issues were explored with each participant. In this way the interviews developed their own logic, particular to each participant. The unanticipated could then be incorporated.

Photography:

This study is concerned with the way in which objects establish visual boundaries of self-recognition and self-definition for the participants. To 'know' of these personally coherent object groupings, they must be seen. An important concept in this study is the recognition that, '..... material objects, too, are representations of cultural and personal experience and that "all textualization is not verbal" (Babcock, cited by Bruner 1985:27).

Photography was used for its potential to provide a detailed record of the participants' object attachments and as, '..... another way of telling' (Berger1982:92). As Lewis Hine observed, 'If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't have to lug the camera around' (cited by Sontag, 1977:185).

The photographs have been assembled in two different ways. The first organization is to reveal each participant's individual objects and their relationship within a particular living room. Secondly, the photographs have been ordered to make comparisons of certain aspects within each living room.

Reflexivity

To conclude this introduction to a study primarily concerned with the constructive inter-relation of objects, people and social setting, it must be recognized that this thesis itself is a particular and personal construction.

As the author of an expression of my ethnographic experiences, I must recognize the inevitable symbolic nature of this writing and the cultural orientations that direct both my expression and your, the reader's, interpretations. As the participants will be seen to construct a particular coherence of object attachment by noting particular consistencies of memories of experience, so too, have I only attended to certain aspects of theory and ethnography. Only through selection and division can any sense be made - but it is a particular sense, a certain map of the territory. As Bruner so clearly puts it, 'Our anthropological productions are our stories about their stories; we are interpreting people as they are interpreting themselves' (1986:10).

What we interpret of the participants in the photographic record of their object attachments, is equally and inevitably a reflection of ourselves. The judgements we make from the clues during our visual detective story, equally mirror our aspirations and experiences as those of the rooms' occupants.

These photographic essays are the 'glass' of the window, in which we can see both ourselves and some of the interior. If we shade the light on the window as we peer in, we can, by shifting positions, view the inside with greater clarity, but our presence is always there. This is a window, not a door, and we can never truly enter the other person's house. Each room and its objects, is both a mirror and a window.

It is vital, in my view, that this relativity of interpretation be recognized in ethnographic writing. As our culture is both a product and a control of our perceptions, we as observers, must be aware of

our inescapable interpretive function. This study calls for a disciplined approach that does not filter out the experiential, intuitive and unavoidably interpretive aspects of ethnography; an approach, in fact, which seizes upon and validates, the very excitement and depth of the interaction of experiences.

This thesis, then, is a mix of theory and ethnographic material. The objective is to provide a reasoned account and yet still maintain the important experiential components of the ethnographer and the participants.