



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Stevens, Daniel, Camic, Paul M. and Solway, R. (2019) Maintaining the self: meanings of material objects after a residential transition later in life. *Educational Gerontology*. ISSN 0360-1277.

Link to official URL (if available):

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2019.1601832>

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



Maintaining the self: Meanings of material objects after a residential transition later in life

Dr. Daniel Stevens, Salomons Institute for Applied Psychology, Canterbury Christ Church University, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 2YG

Prof. Paul M. Camic¹, Salomons Institute for Applied Psychology, Canterbury Christ Church University, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN1 2YG, paul.camic@canterbury.ac.uk

Dr. Rob Solway, Kent Clinical Neuropsychology Service, Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust, Gillingham. Kent ME7 5NY

Please cite as follows:

Stevens, D., ¹Camic, P.M. & Solway, R. (2019). Maintaining the self: Meanings of material objects after a residential transition later in life. *Educational Gerontology*. ePublication ahead of print: [OI:10.1080/03601277.2019.1601832](https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2019.1601832)

Abstract

Introduction: Moving house later in life can be a major transition and valued material objects may be important to this process. The present study aimed to develop an explanatory model for the meanings of material objects to older adults in the context of a residential transition.

Method: Using grounded theory methodology, 12 participants were interviewed about the meanings and roles of valued material objects following a residential transition. Older adult participants lived in either their own home or a care home. **Results:** The model entails two core categories, “threats to identity” and “objects and identity continuity” along with four explanatory concepts, “moving and identity discontinuity”, “connections across time”, “attachments to others”, and “preserving self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation”.

Discussion: Objects were described to have important personal meanings which helped people maintain a sense of identity continuity following residential transition. They were associated with comfort, security and life review processes, which support identity continuity later in life. **Conclusion:** Moving house later in life can threaten a person’s sense of self. However, material objects can help maintain a sense of identity continuity through

¹ Corresponding author

reminiscence and life review processes. Implications for community and residential care moving house transitions are discussed.

Key words: material objects, transition, moving house, ageing, possessions, later life

Introduction

As people age they face a number of lifespan transitions. For some, older age brings new life opportunities but may also be associated with increasing likelihood of frailty, illness and disability (Wahrendorf, Reinhardt & Siegrist, 2013). Later life can also be a time when many people find they need to adjust to living alone following the loss of a loved one. The increased vulnerability associated with these significant life events often means that housing needs change as people age. However, moving in itself can be a major transition. Moving house later in life is not always planned, sometimes a move is in response to illness or disability (Walker, Curry & Hogstel, 2007). Regardless of whether a move is voluntary or welcomed transition is often associated with uncertainty, stress, and a sense of loss (Morse, 2000). Furthermore, in some cases moving house later in life has been associated with a deterioration in health (Choi, 1996).

Nolan et al., (1996) suggests moving to a care home is more likely to be regarded as a positive choice when the person is provided with information about moving, has had time to anticipate moving, has been involved with decision-making related to the move, and when there has been some opportunity to explore alternatives to moving and their emotional response to moving. The experience of transitioning to a care home is improved when a person has a sense of choice and control over moving (Fisher et al., 2006).

It has been long established that objects can have a special role in infant attachment processes. Bowlby (1979) described attachment theory as a way of conceptualising the human tendency to make strong emotional bonds with others. Early in life, these bonds provide infants with essential comfort and security. Primary attachment figures provide children with a secure base which enables them to explore the world (Bowlby, 1969, 1979). In the care giver's absence, children often make use of special items termed "transitional objects" (Winnicott,

1971) for comfort. These items are thought to represent a symbolic connection with the caregiver which provides the child with a sense of comfort and security.

Research about the significance of valued objects later in life is relatively sparse, however there is some evidence that people with valued objects adapt better to nursing homes, and are better supported by staff (Wapner et al., 1990). A study carried out by Sherman (1991) also found that older adults living in a care home scored lower on measures of life satisfaction when they did not possess any valued objects. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson proposed older adults are tasked with reflecting on the life they have lived with a sense of meaning and contentment (Erikson et al., 1986). While Erikson did not directly explore the role of objects during this developmental stage, he and colleagues did note familiar possessions appeared to provide a sense of support, solace and pleasure for older adults. Cooper (1976) also describes a relationship between objects and identity, suggesting the objects people consider meaningful can reflect something about the nature of their self. Rochberg-Halton (1986) proposes humans make use of objects to develop and maintain a sense of self through an ongoing self-dialogue process between a person and their belongings. Existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir claimed ownership of possessions can provide a sense of “ontological security” later in life (de Beauvoir, 1973). Tobin (1996) referred to this in terms of “self-continuity”. He described some cherished possessions represent the legacy of a person. Such items provide comfort in old age, as they offer assurance of their self-continuity into the future.

Additionally, there is a well-established relationship between objects and memory (Nord, 2013; van Hoof et al., 2016). Casey’s (1987) comprehensive work on memory highlights the role of objects as aide-memoires later in life. He also highlights how objects from an earlier time in life can act as inducers of reminiscence.

With an ageing population there are a growing number of people who require support with residential transitions later in life. Some studies have identified valued objects may be important to this process (e.g. Rubinstein, 1987; Sherman & Dasher, 2005) yet the significance of objects is currently not well understood and related theory is limited (Solway, Thompson, Camic, & Chatterjee, 2015). As such, the present study aimed to build an explanatory model for the significance of valued objects to older adults in the context of a residential transition. The importance of such a model could help develop psychological understanding around the role of objects in relation to residential transitions, which could inform ways of supporting people with the process of moving and encourage further research into material objects and their relationships to ageing and home transitions.

Method

Participants

There is no general consensus on the age at which a person becomes old (WHO, 2002). Ageing is a biological process, but it is also subject to the constructions by which society makes sense of old age (Ebrahip, 2000). As such, no minimum chronological age was imposed on recruitment for this study. A snowball sampling technique (Cooper et al., 2012) was used to recruit participants. Recruitment materials were developed to invite people who had moved house 'later in life' to participate. A website was created and shared through social media. In addition, recruitment flyers were posted to organisations likely to have contact with adults who would identify with this study. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, no criteria were imposed on when participants had moved or the type of property they had moved to. Although properties ranged in size, for each participant the move represented downsizing from their former home.

Nineteen people were approached to participate in this study. Eleven older adults and one manager of a care home consented to take part. All older adults identified as white British

with further demographic details presented in table 1. Participants were recruited from within the community in southeast England and from a care home in London. The project was approved by [blinded for review] university ethics panel and adhered to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009).

Table 1 here

Design and data analysis

Following procedures outlined by Glaser (1978) and Urquhart (2013) a grounded theory approach was used to generate and analyse data. A critical realist epistemological perspective was adopted when designing and carrying out this research. This perspective assumes the constructs in this research are part of an objective reality which are being described through the use of causal language (Sayer, 2000).

Following the coding procedure outlined by Glaser (1978) data were open coded, selectively coded and then theoretically coded. The first five interviews were coded line-by-line (Strauss, 1987). This helped minimise preconceptions (Charmaz, 2006) and provided a sense of the range of meanings present in the data. Interviews were then selectively coded while making theoretical memos which encompassed many ideas but included notes on potential relationships within the data and considerations for potential theoretical codes. Through a process of sorting data by selective codes, referring to theoretical memos, and drawing diagrams, an initial set of theoretical codes and a draft model describing the relationships between codes was developed. The codes and model were further developed and refined following discussions with all authors and a colleague external to the project. A reflective diary was kept throughout this process.

Procedure

During interviews Mischler (1979) suggests meaning should be viewed within the social context that it occurs. As such, all interviews except one² took place in person where people lived. Prior to interview participants were asked if they could think about some of their most personally valued objects to talk about. Interviews typically started off unstructured, initially asking participants to show the interviewer some of their objects; this often also involved a tour around their living spaces. As interviews progressed they became more structured and questions were asked with reference to a pre-prepared guide. The pre-prepared interview guide was developed through consultation between the authors of this paper and with reference to questions outlined in existing literature (e.g. Kroger & Adair, 2008). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with a duration between 21 and 114 minutes (M = 49 minutes); later interviews become more focused and slightly briefer due to an increased focus on theoretical sampling (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000).

Results

Overview of the model

Figure 1 is an explanatory model for the meanings of material objects for older adults in the context of a residential transition. Contributory categories and subcategories are presented in table 2. The model depicts how the process of residential transition can present a number of threats to identity continuity. The model also demonstrates how objects can have a role in maintaining a sense of identity in this context.

Figure 1 here

Table 2 here

² One interview was carried out over the phone. This interview followed the same format, with the interviewer asking the participant to describe the objects in the room as they referred to them.

Participants reported moving house later in life can present a challenge to identity. Moving for some meant leaving behind a place they identify with and can also mean adjusting to living in a new place they do not necessarily identify with. In addition, the moving process can involve giving up objects and losing objects which also has implications for a person's sense of self. Leaving behind objects can be experienced as a loss of self, and can be symbolic of a transition in self-status. In contrast, objects kept following a move can have important roles related to the maintenance of identity. Objects were often described as having had connections to past memories of childhood, former places, holidays or special occasions. These objects were cited as a source of comfort and gave a sense of continuity by providing people with concrete reminders of where they have come from and the important life events they have lived through. Furthermore, these objects when on display in the home also provide a means of conveying a sense of who a person is to others which can also function to maintain identity. Objects sometimes represented attachments to loved ones. These objects provide a symbolic link to significant others, living and deceased, which help maintain a sense of connection with others across time and space. This in turn may help sustain a sense of identity continuity at a time when their circumstances have undergone significant changes.

Also described was a role for objects in preserving themselves and the memories of their ancestors into the future. This is achieved through a process of looking after inherited objects and making plans to pass objects on to the next generation. Some participants shared their hopes to pass on these objects and their own items to the next generation as a way of ensuring they and their ancestors continue to be remembered. Some, however, shared feelings of discomfort because they were uncertain of who will inherit their possessions. This is proposed to represent a threat to identity continuity for those unable to identify a recipient for their objects, risking not being remembered in the future. The categories contributing to the

model will now be considered in more detail. Selective quotes along with pseudonyms will be used to exemplify the categories and sub-categories.

Moving and identity discontinuity

“It feels a bit like living out of a suitcase.” (Sharon, care home resident)

Place and identity

Moving later in life could present a challenge to one’s identity. For some, part of who they were was associated with the place they were leaving. For example, Ron explained how it was hard to leave London, *“I am London born and bred man and beast... at 9 years old it was normal to go to west end cinemas, west end pictures and so I am used to having everything to hand...and it’s a day’s outing now to go out there”*. For others, moving to a new place challenged their ideas about who they are. For example, Peter described trialling out a move to a care home, which seemed to challenge his sense of who he was, *“So, I tried it... what I found was, I was sitting opposite a hundred-year-old person, they’re still with it, but I thought ‘well is this me?’”*.

Loss of objects, loss of self

For all participants, moving home involved downsizing to a smaller residence. This involved giving up some items and working out ways to fit remaining items into a smaller space. By far, those with the least space were the participants who lived in a care home. These participants lived out of a single room with very limited storage. As such, these participants faced greater pressure to give up their objects following the move. The care home manager commented on how the downsizing process can be difficult for residents, *“it must be really, really hard for people who are giving up maybe a three, four, two bedroom house to move into what is essentially one room in care generally”*. Giving up objects to downsize to a new home presented as a challenge to participants identity. Leaving behind objects which symbolised an aspect of a person’s life could be experienced as leaving behind a part of one’s self. Victoria,

who downsized after her partner died, described this difficult process, *“very much uh a feeling...that you are unpicking... layers and layers of my life with my partner...and then so to unpick it all and decide which bits of it to get rid of, I mean only obviously symbolically...but even so yes it’s not a process I would recommend to anybody it’s horrible”*. Some of the participants who had moved to a care home, described how they had little control over the process of deciding which objects to keep or let go. For example, Sharon explained that her daughter had been responsible for moving her belongings to the care home due to being hospitalised at the time. She described how a cherished set of kitchen pans had been lost in this process, *“Stainless steel one’s yeah, I bought one every week, a different size. Now that wouldn’t mean anything to her but it did to me”*. Eleanor similarly described how she lost a valued object in the process of moving to a care home, *“Well I had somebody helping me and she thought oh well she’s never going to need an umbrella any more I’ll just get rid of all her umbrellas and um did...not nice at all...”*. For both Sharon and Eleanor, it seemed as if the loss of the pans and the umbrella may have been representative of a deeper sense of loss.

Connections across time

“Just my things, they just remind me of my life” (Bridget)

The objects which survived participants’ residential transition often had strong links to the past. Talking about these objects regularly prompted reminiscence and participants shared stories from their life. Objects were commonly linked to memories of childhood, a former home, holidays and special occasions.

Memories of childhood

Some objects were associated with memories from childhood. For example, Jim explained why a clay dog he owned was so important to him, *“Well, that is that’s my little dog Blacky. Called Blacky because he came from Blackpool and he’s black and it’s the first thing I ever won... It reminds me of happy times, innocent childhood times”*. This was a sentiment echoed

by other participants, *“they have associations which were to do with being a child... without any kind of angst or worry”* (Victoria).

Places of the past

Other objects were associated with memories of times spent in past places where they resided or felt connected to in some way. For example, Sharon talked about a collection of frog related objects on display in her room in the care home (figure 4), *“...I mean at one point I was into frogs. We had some of them appear in the garden, they used to come back every spring bank holiday for years. I’d sit out in the back garden for hours in the night with a frog, used to tickle it under the chin”*. Sharon’s frog objects appeared to provide a mnemonic link to times spent in the garden of her former home.

Some participants remarked that objects they had with them now were kept because they had been on display in their family home when they were growing up. These objects were valued because they had simply always been present, *“well these were always on display as well and this little fellow I don’t know where he came from but as far as I remember he was always there”* (Jim). These objects may serve as symbols of continuity, particularly following a significant transition such as a move.

Bridget, who also lives in a care home, had a painting of her former house on the wall. She proudly shared ‘the view’ of her former home and garden, *“that’s the view from looking out when I was up there...it’s beautiful, lovely...this is my garden...It’s very quiet up there and everybody knows everybody”*. This painting not only served as a reminder of Bridget’s old home, and the life she had there, but also provided a way of sharing this memory with others.

The care home manager described how staff connect to residents through the objects in their room and the memories this elicits from their past, *“if somebody’s distressed you look for things in the room that mean something to them because then you can talk about*

them...because the more you know about the person and their past you've got a starter as to what you could talk about that would make them happy."

Holidays and special occasions

Souvenirs from holidays were also important to some participants. For example, Julia talked about how her collection of stones from Crete reminded her of a family holiday, "*And another thing is Crete... one year we rented a place with [daughter], it was a tiny place on the south of Crete and just round the corner there was this beach which I called dream beach, because all the stones, I mean I've got loads of them but this was the first one I found*". Some objects were associated with memories of specific events or occasions such as weddings or anniversaries, "*That's on the boat at our anniversary yes, that was our 50 years anniversary, been together*" (Bridget). These objects were typically photographs on display in participants living spaces, "*Well I certainly want the photos... they are all the times, the people, and things y'know. It all comes back... I must have the wedding photos, so I've got that sorta thing there*" (Iris). These objects symbolised the important events in participants own life history.

Attachment to others

"It's usually got some connection with the family or someone a friend that meant a lot to us"

(Wendy)

Family and friends

Some objects held a strong attachment to friends or family. For example, Julia reflected how most of her valued objects were often related to important people in her life, "*I see that what I value here is the children's stuff and its connections to family*". Bridget, who lives in a care home, also described how objects connected to friends and family were important to her, "*I value most, the photographs of various people, various friends, that's my family up there...*". These objects appeared to provide participants with concrete physical reminders of their important relationships, "*I keep them close to me, it's nice to look at them... nice to think about them*" (Bridget).

The care home manager spoke about the importance of pictures of friends and family especially at a time of residential transition, *“I was taking all the pictures off the wall and saying to the transport driver please ensure these go into her room and they’re put up so she doesn’t feel isolated”*. Having pictures of family and friends are thought to provide people with a sense of comfort and a reminder of current and past connections.

Lost loved ones

Some objects were specifically connected with deceased loved ones. For example, Iris pointed out a collage on her wall, *“...I’ve even got my picture there which basically they’re all people that are very close to me, but all gone...”*. These objects were not always pictures, participants described a range of items which had a connection one way or another to someone deceased. For example, Keith talked about a tin of nails that used to belong to his brother, *“well my brother, my brother was killed in a car crash... and there’s a small tin of nails which belonged to [him] which I haven’t thrown away”*. Sometimes these items had taken on a new significance because of the bereavement, *“that has become more important since I lost my wife”* (Ron). Wendy described how objects connected to lost loved ones can stir up memories and emotions, *“I remember I picked up a nutcracker and it brought back an instant memory of my father, and I dissolved into tears”* (Wendy). In these cases, objects had become symbolic to the bereaved.

Preserving self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation

“I think the other feeling that relates to them is that I like the thought... that I’ve got children and grandchildren who can inherit them, and I hope treasure them” (Victoria)

Inherited objects

Participants often kept objects because they had been inherited from previous generations in the family, *“There’s one there that goes back to my great grandma”* (Eleanor).

These inherited objects provided participants with a concrete link to people from the past. One participant even described how they were unable to let go of a vase that was passed down from a grandparent when it had been broken, *“I just couldn’t throw it, the bits are in there and I just couldn’t throw it”* (Iris). Inherited objects were sometimes imbued with stories that told something about where the family had come from. For example, some objects related to members of the family who served in the war, *“He was a wireless operator, I’ve still got his kit bag I should’ve brought that on display really”* (Jim). Victoria described how a chair she had inherited from her father was special to her family due to how her father had mended it, *“my father took the beadwork off [and] recovered it with welders’ aprons... I have had people fix a broken arm on it and stuff but I don’t want it to be recovered, I want it to stay with the welders apron on it...”*. Some participants reported a sense of responsibility for preserving these objects *“[Talking about a piano] That was my grandfather’s so I’m still looking after it”* (Julia).

Objects and the future

There was a sense of responsibility for preserving inherited objects for the next generation, *“I don’t really consider myself owning these things, I’m taking care of them for the next generation”* (Ron). Gifting these objects to the next generation was seen as a means of maintaining the family legacy, *“...I kept a couple of bits, like that bureau, and a roll top desk, which were my fathers and my grandfathers...I’ve had them for 40 years or so, and I told both my sons that I want one of them to have them rather than selling them off or getting rid of them, purely to keep the family line going...”* (Keith). Wendy described how she had become a keeper of her children’s possessions and plans to pass them on now they have their own families, *“I thought let’s give it to them, and if they want to keep it, they keep it... it’s more relevant for them now to keep, for their memory, for their kids”*. In passing on these objects Wendy also seems to be planning on handing over responsibility for maintaining the family memories to

the next generation. Iris described how she was having difficulty with the idea of throwing an object away during the moving process and was relieved when her daughter-in-law offered to take it, “*well funnily enough that goes back to my great grandma and I knew she was going to put it on the fireplace*”. Knowing the object would continue to exist on display on her daughter-in-law’s fireplace allowed Iris to give up the object and provided her with a degree of comfort that her great grandmother and perhaps herself would continue to be remembered.

However, some participants had not identified people to pass their objects on to. In these cases, thinking about the future of objects seemed to provide some discomfort. For example, Jim openly reflected on his dilemma of wanting to pass on a piece of furniture he had inherited, but not knowing anyone who would value it the way he does, “*I don't know, I keep thinking about who to give it to... you think if I give it to someone I want them to have feelings for it as I have, and that's unfair because it's different circumstances and you can't expect that...*”. For Jim, the idea of his object going to someone outside of his family was an uncomfortable thought, “*I don't like the thought of it going to somebody I don't know*”. This could be because giving objects to a stranger risks the memories and family history associated with the object being lost. Eleanor also contemplated the future of her objects. She described having no close living family and was uncertain about who to give her objects to, “*I'd better do a little thinking so that when I'm gone if there's anything that I want passed on to anybody in particular that will be what happens*” (Eleanor). Not having a person to pass objects on to may challenge identity continuity for older adults by increasing the risk of not being remembered in the future.

Discussion

This study aimed to build an explanatory model for the meanings of material objects to older adults in the context of a residential transition. Using a grounded theory analysis, a model was proposed which suggests material objects can play an important part in identity maintenance

processes following a move. Four explanatory concepts emerged; moving and identity discontinuity, connections across time, attachments to others, and preserving self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation. This model will now be discussed with reference to existing literature and theory.

Links with extant literature

Participants in this study highlighted how moving later in life presented a challenge to their identity. Identity is a complex field which has been described as ‘elusive and difficult to define’ (Wetherell & Mohanty, 2010 p.3). Work carried out by Erikson (1968) provides a framework for identity which is based on the premise that identity refers to a subjective sense of sameness and continuity across time and space. Furthermore, an optimal sense of identity provides a holistic sense of well-being where one feels ‘at home’ in their self and the world around them (Kroger & Adair, 2008). More recently, Breakwell (1986, 1992) has proposed a theory for identity which suggests there are four motives which guide actions towards a cohesive identity. These motives are continuity across time and situation, distinctiveness from others, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Breakwell’s theory proposes identity is threatened whenever a social context prevents the satisfaction of these four identity motives (Bardi, Jaspal, Polek & Schwartz, 2014). In this study, the context of residential transition provides many potential barriers to the identity motives suggested by Breakwell (1986). Leaving behind a place for some participants represented a significant interruption to continuity of self. The relationship between place and identity is well established in psychological and geographical literature (Korpela, 1989). Identification with a place has been described as a type of social identity by some (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). Place identification refers to when a person expresses their belonging to a group defined by a location, for example, when someone refers to their self as a ‘Londoner’. As such, leaving a place can mean losing membership to the social group characteristic of that place. In addition, moving can also involve integrating with the

social identity of a new place. For example, some participants in this study made comments indicating they did not identify with people who live in care homes. Proshansky (1978) proposed the relationship people have with physical environments is also conceptually related to the structure of their personality and forms a sub-part of identity in its own right. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) go further, and suggest all aspects of identity can have place related implications. As such, leaving a place not only represents a geographical change, but can also mean leaving behind a sub-part of identity, or as one participant in this study eloquently described, it can involve “unpicking” one’s self from a former life.

In this study, a relationship between objects and identity was identified. Participants described how objects had numerous personal meanings and connections to memories and important people from their lives. For all participants moving house consisted of downsizing to a smaller space which required giving up material possessions. For some, this was a painful process which involved giving up objects with important personal meanings and may also be symbolic of other personal losses happening during that period of time. For example, leaving behind kitchen items to move into a care home may also represent a loss of independence and the role of being someone who can cook. Such issues may also relate to Breakwell’s (1986) identity motives of self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Our model proposes moving later in life can contribute to a state of identity discontinuity (due to leaving a place, adapting to a new place, and losing objects). Moving can bring up threats to identity cohesion (Breakwell, 1986) and contributes to later life related changes which require integration with the self (Erikson, et al.,1986). The model also contends the meanings participants derive from objects, the connections across time, attachments to others, and preserving self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation, helps to promote the maintenance of identity after a residential transition.

Connections across time

Issues related to identity can become increasingly salient later in life due to age related physical and social changes (Lowenthal, Thurnher, & Chiriboga, 1975). Erikson et al. (1986) suggest as people get older they are challenged to reflect on their identity and integrate who they have been with who they are now. This life review process becomes more important as people get older as they may feel they have less time to contemplate who they are as a person. Participants in this study described how some objects were valued particularly for the connections they have to different times in their life. These objects invoked memories from childhood, important places from the past, and of special occasions. Reminiscing in this way can provide participants with a sense of who they are and how they have developed across time which supports life review processes and help maintain a sense of identity (Breakwell, 1992). These findings compliment studies which suggest reminiscence processes are important to identity maintenance later in life. For example, Boylin, Gordon and Nehrke (1976) report a correlation between reminiscing for the purpose of life review and high ego integrity scores for people living in nursing homes. Lewis (1971) also found an association between reminiscence and maintaining past and present self-concept scores while under stress. Kroger and Adair (2008) support identity maintenance processes by providing people with concrete, physical reminders of who person and who they have been in the past. The findings discussed above may support the importance of objects to identity maintenance processes following a residential transition.

Attachment to others

Many objects had a connection to close friends or family, living and deceased as a kind of “object memory” (Phenice & Griffore, 2013). Kroger and Adair (2008) reported a similar finding in their investigation into the symbolic meanings of objects for older adults, suggesting the symbolic connection between objects and loved ones may provide older adults with a sense of comfort. Psychoanalytic theories of infant development and attachment provide a tentative

framework for understanding this phenomenon. These items are thought to represent a symbolic connection with the caregiver which provides the child with a sense of security which promotes independence and autonomy. Furthermore, Bowlby (1969) suggested when attachment behaviours can no longer be directed towards members of an older generation, they may be directed towards members of the same generation or the younger one (Brown & Shlosberg, 2006). As such, objects connected with close friends or younger family members, may also serve as transitional objects for adults later in life. The results from this study suggest objects that with attachments to others may provide a similar function later in life. Objects linked to close loved ones can provide participants with a sense of comfort, security and closeness which supports identity maintenance by enabling the self-esteem and self-efficacy identity motives to be satisfied (Breakwell, 1992), as well as a sense of continuity across time and place.

Preserving self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation

Participants described objects that were valued due to their legacy qualities. Objects had been passed down from prior generations, and participants spoke about their intentions to pass objects on to family members in the future. This fits with Tobin's (1996) hypothesis that objects offer a way of assuring self-continuity later in life. Sousa, Patrao, and Mendes (2015) suggest the process of giving objects later in life is associated with positive affective patterns such as self-worth, autonomy, success, and strength. They argue this process is generally a positive emotional experience for the older adult. However, some participants in the present study appeared to grapple with this process. Some questioned whether others would appreciate the object like they do. Tobin (1996) noted how objects cherished for idiosyncratic reasons can be difficult to pass on as they have limited appeal to others.

Care implications

Social service, older care support staff and family members could develop plans to better support older adults with a residential transition. Supporting adults with making decisions about their objects as they consider moving could reduce emotional distress associated with losing valued possessions and the impact this has on identity continuity. This is particularly important for older adults moving into care homes who may rely on others to move their objects. Those supporting people with a move are encouraged to talk about objects with older adults, as it might not be obvious that something has important associations with identity until there has been a conversation about it. For example, the comfort of keeping hold of objects, may outweigh the value of having extra space. Finally, consideration should be given to whether a person can be supported with accessing the positive affective processes associated with passing on objects to future generations (Sousa et al., 2015). These discussions could first occur between family members (and friends) and the person transitioning and ideally should not be rushed but done over a period of time. This would allow for reflection and stories to be told about objects, some of which may not be known to families. It is also likely some of these discussions will be associated with strong feelings and a range of memories, both positive and not so. Those listening should be prepared to take time and allow the stories and associations to be told. Families may want to audio or video record some of these conversations to share later with family and friends and possibly with care staff, if transitioning into residential care. Staff in residential care settings should ask about the significance or stories behind the objects a person brings when moving in as a medium to both build rapport and learn about their personal history, values and identity.

Limitations and research recommendations

This study recruited a small number of white British people living in southern England. Future research in this area should consider recruiting from different older adult populations

including those from ethnically and religiously diverse communities. The participants in this study also freely volunteered to take part in this research. As such, there could be particular characteristics about the people in this study and their values about objects which differ from the wider population. Furthermore, participants in this study predominantly lived alone. A further useful area to research may be exploring whether there are differences between those who live alone and those who live with others.

Conclusion

Two core categories emerged from this grounded theory study; threats to identity and objects and identity continuity. The model proposes moving house later in life can challenge a person's sense of self. Moving can involve leaving behind a place and objects that one identifies with, and integrating the physical, social, and psychological changes related to moving with one's identity. Objects were found to have important personal meanings which helped people maintain a sense of identity continuity following residential transition. Three further explanatory constructs supported the core categories: connections across time, attachment to others, and preserving the self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation. Objects were associated with comfort, security and life review processes which support identity continuity later in life. Recommendations include supporting people to move house along with meaningful objects to help facilitate identity maintenance processes, and also exploring the topic of objects and identity with older adults while working therapeutically in residential and community settings.

References

- Bardi, A., Jaspal, R., Polek, E., & Schwartz, S. (2014). Values and identity process theory: Theoretical integration and empirical interactions. In *Identity Process Theory*, R. Jaspal & G. Breakwell (Eds.), pp. 175-200. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boylin, W., Gordon, S. K. & Nehrke, M. F. (1976). Reminiscing and ego integrity in

- institutionalized elderly males. *The Gerontologist*, 16, 118-124. doi:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/geront/16.2.118>.
- Breakwell, G. (1986). *Coping with threatened identity*. London: Methuen.
- Breakwell, G. (1992). Processes of self-evaluation: efficacy and estrangement. In G. M. Breakwell (Ed.) *Social psychology of identity and the self-concept*. Surrey: Surrey University Press.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. Hove, East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge.
- Casey, E. S. (1987). *Remembering: A phenomenological study*. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Choi, N. G. (1996). Older persons who move: Reasons and health consequences. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 15, 325-344. doi:10.1177/073346489601500304 .
- Cooper, C. (1976). The house as symbol of the self. In H. M. Proshansky, W. H. Ittelson & L. G. Rivlin (Eds.) *Environmental psychology: People and their physical settings*, 2nd ed. New York: Holt.
- Cooper, H., Camic, P.M., Long, D.L., Panter, A.T., Rindskopf, D. & Sher, K.J. (Eds.) (2012). *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Volumes 1-3*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981). *The meaning of things: Domestic symbols and the self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

de Beauvoir, S. (1973). *The coming of age*. New York: Warner.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.

Erikson, E., Erikson, J., & Kivnick, H. (1986). *Vital involvement in old age*. New York: W. Norton.

Fisher M., Qureshi H., Hardyman W., Homewood J. (2006). *Using qualitative research in systematic reviews: Older people's views of hospital discharge*, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.

Hogg, M. A. & Abrams, D. (1988). *Social identifications*. London: Routledge

Korpela, K. M. (1989). Place identity as a product of environmental self-regulation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 9, 241-256. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(89\)80038-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(89)80038-6)

Kroger, J., & Adair, V. (2008). Symbolic meanings of valued personal objects in identity transitions of late adulthood. *Identity*, 8, 5-24. doi:10.1080/15283480701787251

Lewis, C. (1971). Reminiscing and self-concept in old age. *Journal of Gerontology*, 26, 240-243. doi: 10.1093/geronj/26.2.240

Lowenthal, M. F., Thurnher, M., & Chiriboga, D. (1975). *Four stages of life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morse, D.L. (2000). Relocation stress syndrome is real. *American Journal of Nursing*, 100, 24-30. doi: 10.1097/00000446-200008000-00046

- Nolan M. R., Walker G., Nolan J., Williams S., Poland F., Curran M. and Kent B. (1996). 'Entry to care: Positive choice or fait accompli? Developing a more proactive nursing response to the needs of older people and their carers', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 242, 265–74.
- Nord, C. (2013). A day to be lived: Elderly peoples possessions for everyday life in assisted living. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27, 135-142. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2012.12.002
- Phenice, L. A., & Griffiore, R. J. (2013). The importance of object memories for older adults. *Educational Gerontology*, 39, 741-749. doi:10.1080/03601277.2013.766536
- Proshansky, H. M. (1978). The city and self-identity. *Environment and Behavior*, 10, 147–69. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013916578102002>
- Rochberg-Halton, E. (1984). Object relations, role models and cultivation of the self. *Environment and Behaviour*, 16, 335–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916584163003>
- Rubinstein, R. L. (1987). The significance of personal objects to older people. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 1, 225-238. doi:10.1016/0890-4065(87)90015-6
- Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and social science*. London: Sage
- Sherman, E. (1991). Reminiscentia: Cherished objects as memorabilia in late-life reminiscence. *The International Journal of Aging & Human Development*, 33, 89-100. doi: 10.2190/FJW1-60UF-WW1R-FP2K
- Sherman, E. & Dacher, J. (2005). Cherished objects and the home: Their meaning and roles in later life. In G. D. Rowles & H. Chaudhury. (Eds.), *Home and identity in late life international perspectives* (pp. 63-79). New York, NY: Springer.
- Solway, R., Thompson, L., Camic, P. M., & Chatterjee, H. J. (2015). Museum object

handling groups in older adult mental health inpatient care. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 17, 201-214. doi:10.1080/14623730.2015.1035520

Sousa, L., Patrão, M., & Mendes, Á. (2015). Material inheritances: An affective story in the history of elderly persons. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 9, 35-52. doi:10.3384/ijal.1652 -8670.15266

Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

British Psychological Society (2009). Code of ethics and conduct. Leicester: BPS. doi:10.1177/0969733008095390

Tobin, S. (1996). Cherished possessions: The meaning of things. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 20, 46-49.

Twigger-Ross, C., & Uzzell, D. (1996). Place and identity processes. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 16, 205-220. doi: 10.1006/jevp.1996.0017

Urquhart, C. (2013). *Grounded theory for qualitative research. A practical guide*. London: Sage Publications.

van Hoof, J., Janssen, M. L., Heesakkers, C. M., Kersbergen, W. V., Severijns, L. E., Willems, L. A., . . . Nieboer, M. E. (2016). The importance of personal possessions for the development of a sense of home of nursing home residents. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, 30, 35-51. doi:10.1080/02763893.2015.1129381ww

Wahrendorf, M., Reinhardt, J., & Siegrist, J. (2013). Relationships of disability with age among adults aged 50 to 85: Evidence from the United States, England and Continental Europe. *Plos ONE*, 8, e71893. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0071893

Walker, C. A., Curry, L. C. & Hogstel, M. O. (2007). Relocation stress syndrome in older

adults transitioning from home to a long-term care facility: Myth or reality? *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health Studies*, 45, 38 -45.

Wapner, S., Demick, J., & Redondo, J. P. (1990). Cherished possessions and adaptation of older people to nursing homes. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 31, 219-235. doi:10.2190/gjpl-atjy-kja3-8c99

WHO (2002). Health statistics and information systems. Proposed working definition of an older person in Africa for the MDS project. Retrieved from:
<http://www.who.int/healthinfo/survey/ageingdefnolder/en/>

Wimpenny, P., & Gass, J. (2000). Interviewing in phenomenology and grounded theory: is there a difference? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31 , 1485-1492.
doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.01431.x

Table 1. *Participant demographics*

| Participant¹ | Gender | Age | Marital status | Type of residence | Time in residence | Recruitment |
|--------------------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Eleanor | Female | 89 | Single | Care home | 8 months | Residential care home |
| 2. Peter | Male | 85 | Wife deceased | House | 8 years | Cardiac exercise class |
| 3. Bridget | Female | 88 | Husband deceased | Care home | 3 years | Residential care home |
| 4. Victoria | Female | 83 | Partner deceased | House | 9 months | Word of mouth |
| 5. Jim | Male | 72 | Single | Flat | 6.5 years | Cardiac exercise class |
| 6. Ron | Male | 77 | Wife deceased | Flat | 2 years | Cardiac exercise class |
| 7. Sharon | Female | 74 | Husband deceased | Care home | 2 years | Residential care home |
| 8. Julia | Female | 69 | Divorced | House | 8 years | Word of mouth |
| 9. Keith | Male | 71 | Married | Flat | 10 years | Cardiac exercise class |
| 10. Wendy | Female | 66 | Married | Flat | 10 years | Word of mouth |
| 11. Iris | Female | 93 | Husband deceased | House | 6 months | Word of mouth |
| 12. Manager | Female | - | - | - | - | Residential care home |

¹ Pseudonyms

Table 2. *Categories, sub-categories, and related codes of the developing model*

| Category | Sub-category | Codes |
|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Moving and identity discontinuity | | |
| | Place and identity | Biography, history, values, reference to self, identity, ageing, work, former home, former place, home, location, always there, origin |
| | Loss of objects, loss of self | Giving up objects, making decisions about objects, leaving objects, losing objects, giving away objects, leaving behind, loss, reflection, emotion |
| Connections across time | | |
| | Memories of childhood | Biography, history, past, memory, remembering event |
| | Places of the past | Place, former home, history, memory |
| | Holidays and special occasions | Holiday, souvenir, celebration, present, gift, memory |
| Attachments to others | | |
| | Family and friends | Attached, attachment, connection, family, friends, reminder, remembering, |
| | Lost loved ones | Attached, attachment, bereavement, loss, remembering spouse, remembering family member |
| Preserving self and ancestors in the memories of the next generation | | |
| | Inherited objects | Connection, inherited, family object |
| | Objects and the future | Passing on, future, future of object, giving objects, legacy, leaving behind, family |