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Household Disbandment in Later Life

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Abstract

Objectives. This study described activities that older people undertake to reduce the volume of their possessions in the course of a residential move to smaller quarters, a process with practical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

Methods. Qualitative interviews were conducted with members of 30 households who had moved in the prior year. The disbandment period, typically lasting about 2 months, was a particular focus of the interview.

Results. The interviews suggested nine reasons why people had accumulated and kept things, which now became problematic for the impending move. The initial steps of disbandment entailed decisions about major furniture and meaningful gifts to family and friends, followed by evaluation of the remaining belongings for retention, sale, further gifts, donation, or discard. Things not divested by one means were reassigned to another strategy. People took pleasure in dispositions that saw their things used, cared for, and valued as they had done, thus fulfilling a responsibility to their belongings.

Discussion. Disbandment is an acute episode of a more general, lifelong process of possession management. It is an encounter with things that are meaningful to the self, but as it unfolds, it also makes new meaning for things.

“It's not a matter of what you can take, but what you can't take.”

—Man, age 83, who moved from a house to a two-bedroom duplex

HOUSEHOLD disbandment is the activity that people undertake to reduce the volume of their possessions in the course of a residential move. To “disband” means to break up or disperse, and what is undone in disbandment is not merely the stock of possessions but also the way that they are arranged to support everyday life and emotions (Rowles, Oswald, & Hunter, 2003; Rubinstein, 1989).

Household moves at every stage of life can disperse and scatter possessions, but we focus on people who are moving in later life, for two reasons. First, as argued below, the stock and store of one's things tend to accumulate across the course of life so that the more mature the mover, the more there is to move. Second, moves in later life typically entail passage into smaller quarters; movers age 65 and older take their house “holdings” to smaller places than those who move at ages 55–64 (National Association of Home Builders, 2001). All this means that disbandment is likely to be a necessary feature of moves in later life and so deserves a special focus.

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Disbandment is an acute episode of possession disposition that stands out from the ongoing task of managing turnover in one's belongings at every stage of life. People constantly acquire and dispose of things—the flow of objects through our lives being the everyday experience of a consumer society (Hetherington, 2004; Strasser, 1999). Some of the things that consumers acquire are physically consumed: Food is eaten, and fireplace logs go up in smoke. Other belongings that once were new or promising get used up, wear out, lose our interest, or are superseded by the next model, and so we dispose of them. Households with children, for example, have toys, and then children outgrow the need of toys. People have possessions that they acquire in order to explore a new identity—musician, gourmet cook, sportsperson—only to be abandoned when that version of the self is obsolete. Product obsolescence and turnover in fashion, for example, led Americans to discard 5.8 million tons of clothing and footwear in 2001 (Environmental Protection Agency, 2003).

We also want to distinguish household disbandment—necessitated by an impending move—from the voluntary campaigns that adults sometimes undertake to reduce their possessions. This is variously called downsizing, decluttering, thinning, or dethinging your life. There is a sizable practical literature about how to go about this, and these activities (sorting, disposing, having a sale) and their attendant emotions may be similar to those of a household disbandment, but without the immediate prospect of a move. People do this because they feel a practical or moral burden from the weight of their property or because they want to make room for yet other things. There is an entire movement encouraging “simple living” and the emotional benefit that flows from low-key consumption (www.newdream.org/thedream).

Yet even as adults manage the flow of objects in and out of their lives, and even as some institute self-imposed purges, things stick. Throughout adulthood, people typically accumulate a growing volume of possessions—more kitchen implements, personal records, books, furniture, and knickknacks. Accumulation flows from marital and family roles that require the maintenance of stable residential households and from work roles that require us to have quantities of clothing and equipment and automobiles for commuting to the job. Accumulation occurs as we undertake sustained or successive projects to develop our selves, acquiring objects to help us pursue culturally induced desires. Acquisition may be a condition of modern life, as explained by theories of consumption (Lury, 1996; Miller, 1998; Slater, 1997), but the retention of possessions is also something that needs to be explained.

The arc of accumulation takes various paths across the later years. For some elders, the volume of their possessions grows inexorably larger or at least is not reduced. People go to their graves in possession of whole house-fulls of objects, and then it falls to their survivors to dispose of the property (Finch & Hayes, 1994). For those who do not reduce or disband, the pace of accumulation may slow because it is no longer driven by work or family roles or because fewer new objects may be needed for leisure and self-presentation (e.g., sporting goods, jewelry). Slowing accumulation of material goods, however, does not forbid spending on other intangible goods such as entertainment, travel, and health care (Moschis, Lee, Mathur, & Strautman, 2000).

Voluntary deaccumulation is another path. Life may be more manageable living with less, especially for those elders with health and financial limitations. There is less to clean, store, secure, maintain, repair, and insure. Permanent reduction in the context of later life could be viewed as the material equivalent of socioemotional selectivity theory (Isaacowitz, Charles, & Carstensen, 2000): a strategic withdrawal to a more manageable kit. Reductions may also occur in anticipation of an eventual move or as part of a practical preparation for death (Johnson & Barer, 1997; Morris, 1992).

Reduction that occurs in conjunction with a residential move is the occasion of what we have studied as “household disbandment.” Marcoux (2001), observing such activities among elders in Montreal, terms this “*casser maison*” (breaking the house). A similar term, “breaking up housekeeping,” was used by the American women studied by Redfoot and Back (1988). Of course, a residential move in later life need not entail disbandment if one is not moving to smaller quarters. In addition, disbandment, as we define it, is not in all cases a one-time event, because individuals may move more than once and in the interim acquire new things.

To sum up, there are three features that differentiate household disbandment in later life from earlier possession management and disposition: Disbandments in later life are necessary, comprehensive, and liminal to mortality all at the same time. First, owing to an impending move, the breakup of the household is necessary as compared with discretionary dispositions that thin out one's property. Second, disbandment is a whole-house affair as compared with handling selected items such as heirloom gifts to family (Marx, Solomon, & Miller, 2004; Morris, 1992). Third, the disbandment is liminal (crosses a threshold) to a more restricted lifeworld because the move is likely to be undertaken as a concession to age-related limitations, actual or anticipated. Moves at other ages may disperse or reduce possessions, as during a divorce (Albrecht, 1980), but later-life disbandment relocates daily life to a reduced setting where the prospect of reversal is small and the vulnerabilities of age might be more effectively managed. As such, the disbandment task is a manifestation of the selective and compensatory adaptation described by Baltes and colleagues in their model of the way that people age well in the face of limitations (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995).

In this article, we address three issues about disbandment. First, we lay out possible reasons why people retain possessions, because the volume and quantity of these things become problematic in a move to smaller quarters. Second, we describe some key features of disbandment. Finally, we summarize the strategies that people use to dispose of things. What distinguishes our study from other research on older people and possessions is our concentration on an acute episode of possession management (a disbandment period) whose task is the entire contents of the household. Our project has nevertheless been informed by studies that have focused on elders' most cherished or important belongings and the meanings that they hold (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kamptner, 1989; Morris, 1992; Redfoot & Back, 1988; Rubinstein, 1987; Sherman, 1991; Sherman & Newman, 1977–78; Wapner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990).

METHODS

In 2002 and 2003, we interviewed persons in 30 households in a midsized Midwestern city. We located these volunteers by posting invitations in senior high-rise apartment buildings, in retirement communities, and in a community newspaper, by mailing to a standing panel of research participants, and by word-of-mouth referrals. We screened volunteers to be over the age of 65, who had moved to a smaller household within the last year and who had been functionally able to participate in the move. When possible, we also sought to interview a family member who had helped the elder with the packing and moving, though this report centers on the perspectives of the elders themselves.

The members and circumstances of these 30 households differed. In 8 cases, we interviewed couples together; 5 households were occupied only by men and 17 only by women. These 38 respondents ranged in age from 60 to 87. They had held diverse occupations but were more likely to have retired from white-collar than blue-collar jobs. Twenty-three of the 30 cases had moved from a single-family house, 4 from a mobile home, 2 from a duplex, and 1 from a retirement community in another city. The destinations included 18 apartments, at least 10 of which were in congregate housing for seniors or assisted living facilities. Five households

moved into another house, with one woman moving in with an adult child. Four households moved into duplexes in retirement communities, and three moved into a condominium or townhouse.

Most respondents gave multiple reasons for moving. The most common reasons involved a recent health event, such as a fall, or the difficulty of continuing to maintain their former home and yard. Other frequently cited reasons for moving included financial considerations or concerns expressed by family members. Four respondents noted that the death of their spouse within the last 1 or 2 years precipitated consideration of a move. Numerous other reasons were more individual to those involved, with one man simply stating that his reason for moving was “to downsize.”

In all cases, the respondents said they had less space in the new place and had been required to dispose of things. This was the exact circumstance that our recruitment strategy had been designed to disclose, though the experiences of these households were so variable that we can only claim to have sampled what must be a great range of disbandment episodes. With one exception, we are basing this report on the retrospective views of our volunteers (one household was in the process of moving). Additional observations of disbandments as they are proceeding (e.g., Marcoux, 2001) would be a rich source of further insight.

Our semistructured interviews centered on respondents' recollection of activities from the period of time when they knew they would move until they did move. We asked how they came to make decisions about what they would and would not take to the new place, about methods of disposition, about the help they received, and about their feelings throughout. As the interviews unfolded, participants also recounted events that occurred long before the immediate disbandment and in its aftermath.

The authors conducted the interviews and generated interview notes (in most cases immediately following the interviews), which served as the first level of analysis. The interview team met periodically to discuss selected transcripts, interview content, and process. During this time, categories that would become the initial codes were developed, and interviews were modified slightly as new ideas emerged, thus following the grounded theory approach to the analysis (Gibbs, 2002). The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for thematic elements using the NVivo program (QSR International, 2002). To reduce researcher bias and assess reliability, the two coders began the analysis with the same interview, met to compare results, and adjusted codes and node definitions based on the comparisons. Throughout the remainder of the coding process, the coders analyzed separate transcripts, communicating daily via personal contact, e-mail, and NVivo memos to maintain consistency. Quality was further ensured by constant comparison and searches for negative cases through text searches and node reports (Gibbs, 2002). Once the researchers were convinced that the nodes had been adequately exploited, models describing connections across nodes were developed and compared with existing literature.

In the accounts that follow, we have changed some details in order to preserve confidentiality.

WHY KEEP THINGS?

People acquire things in various ways and for various reasons (Dittmar, 1992; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Lunt & Livingstone, 1992). Brief reflection reveals that any single acquisition often has mixed functions (a necessity, a luxury, a gift received) and meanings (it pleases, it symbolizes). The reasons for acquiring things may well also be the reasons for retaining them (if they are not the sort of good that is literally consumed), but it is quite possible for the function and meaning of a thing to shift over time, to have a career. Dant (1999) points out that material objects, once possessed, have an afterlife wherein they are “lived

with” and can attain quasi-social relationships with their owners. There is an agency to keeping, not just the effort to arrange and maintain things in a household, but also the effort to imaginatively endow some possessions with an inner life—an *anima*—toward which the owner must act with respect. Thus, it is worthwhile to consider the keeping of things because the retention of (so many) things becomes the later occasion for household disbandment.

Our interviews, which were occasions to reflect on the volume of one's possessions, suggested nine reasons why people carry (with a nod to Kahn and Antonucci, 1980) a “convoy of material support” across time. To the extent that this list touches on the function and meaning of things, it overlaps observations generated from studies of elders' cherished possessions and the topic of possessions in general (Belk, 1988; Furby, 1978).

1. Things Seem Useful

People maintain some belongings because they satisfy a need or help manage everyday life—if not today, then on some probable occasion. From our study, one could believe that beds are the most eminently practical thing in the house, given how quickly people mentioned that they had kept this or that bed when they moved. Dining tables ran a close second in frequency of mentions. At the same time, respondents tagged the disposal of many objects with the valedictory rationale, “I had no use for it.” Even when giving such things away, they were happy to report that their former possessions were now useful to others. One woman said of her crochet hooks:

Respondent: Why keep 'em? Don't use 'em anymore, why keep 'em? I gave them away.

Interviewer: Oh, to the VFW, or ...

Respondent: Yeah. Somebody could use them.

2. Things Are Worth Money

Objects might be kept for no other reason but that they could be converted into cash. A number of our respondents held sets of china, crystal, and silverware that they thought to be valuable, even though they had not made much use of them, nor did family members want them. Collections were also held because they were “worth something”:

I had got a collection of unicorns. My daughter is kind of responsible for the collection. She kept adding things to it, but she doesn't want them now. They are worth something, but I don't know as if I could ever sell them for what they are worth.

The statement above exemplifies a challenge that disbandment brings to the fore: how to realize the value of such holdings in the marketplace.

3. Things Give Pleasure

People judged some belongings to be beautiful or delightful in their own right (e.g., flowering plants). Possessions also served as prompts to the imagination (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Books, in particular, seemed to fulfill this purpose for the elders in our study. One woman exclaimed, “I love my cookbooks, and my sewing books I like.” Another woman, an American history buff, delighted in a rock that she said came from Lake Superior when the Mackinac Bridge was built.

4. Things Represent Us

Belongings, singly but also composed into sets or ensembles, express our meanings or feelings, encode our values, reinforce our conformity or uniqueness. Our things remind us who we are

and tell our story to others (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). In our interviews, we asked whether some things were harder to deal with than others, assuming these would be the more cherished objects. One elder, a musician who refused to part with her most prized possession, responded:

I don't think there was anything I felt too strongly about, except the piano. That was so much part of my life because I taught for so many years—not only the way I earned my living but because music's part of my life.

Things can also be retained as material biography, memorializing personal occasions, relationships, achievements, ways of engagement in the world, and past selves. Life's souvenirs might include “a lot of bowling trophies, a whole basement full of bowling trophies” or “eighteen plaques of different kinds . . . from the volunteer work.” Two retired clergymen in our study had been holding extensive files that recorded their lifetime in ministry. Another man rued the relinquishment of his LP record collection, which had been a reminder of his cultural currency. One woman had a tablecloth that was so stained she could no longer use it, but she could not throw it away because it reminded her of a trip she and her husband had taken to Europe. It was a mnemonic cue, in McCracken's (1987) words, “a site of important personal information” (p. 214).

5. Things Conjure the Future

People keep things that they have not explored, used, or incorporated. Such objects include unread books, underused gadgets, and clothes that are a size too small. A former home economics teacher saved quilting scraps (“boxes and boxes of them”) in the firm belief that she would resume that activity. She had had to throw some scraps away, and the interviewer asked her if that had been hard. She replied:

Yes a little bit; in fact I went back out to my storage shed just yesterday and got two boxes. Neighbor down the hall dresses dolls and so I went to see if I had any trimmings that she could use. I know this sounds silly, but it is a little bit hard to give up things. And I'm going to make quilts. I've already made several quilts.

When people face the disposal of unused possessions in disbandment, they are conceding that possible futures or possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) will not come about. Said one woman:

I had a lot of hobby stuff. I went through that and put a lot of it in the garage sale. And a lot of things that I had hoped to do sometime [laughs].

6. Social Reciprocity to Gift Givers

Things received as gifts remind their keepers of past occasions or emotions, but some gifts can carry an obligation to conserve the gift and so perpetuate a bond with the giver. Keeping things is keeping ties (Belk, 1979). One woman, who recently moved to an assisted living facility, not only kept the gifts of others, she devised a way to memorialize her benefactors even after her death. Asked if she collected anything, she said:

No, I'm not too much of a collector except what I got from foreign students. I was in the host family program at the college, and I have also visited them in other countries. Japan and China and Malaysia. They'd call me “Mom.” There are things I picked up overseas, or they gave them to me. They're not terribly valuable, but I'm proud of this collection. And I wouldn't know where I got all these things, but I have a book that says either who gave them to me or where I picked them up when. So that if anybody's interested after I'm gone, they'll have a little history.

7. Responsibility to Forebears

Heirlooms are legacies, literally “emissaries” sent from the past into the present. The conservation of heirlooms immortalizes forebears and ensures the continuity of family history (Tobin, 1996). One couple took pride in their antiques and was insistent about holding on to family furniture:

Wife: We kept it all. The dining room furniture belonged to his parents when he was little.

Husband: If we couldn't have kept the buffet, we wouldn't have moved.

The proper disposition of “family things” occupies a place in disbandment accounts seemingly out of all proportion to their volume. The paradox of heirlooms is that the longer a thing endures in the hands of kin, it has more family “past” to perpetuate, but the forebears who originated it grow less familiar to the current owners.

8. Conservation Is a Virtue

That some people “never throw things away” is an exaggeration, but we noted a strong moral compulsion to retain things that might be useful, if not to the saver, then to someone else. People suggest that such saving among current elders is a habit of frugality born of the scarcities of the Great Depression, but our study is unable to confirm that. What we can confirm is a strong reluctance to discard functional objects, even if not foreseeably useful. “We're keepers,” people said.

I kept a lot of clothes, my closets are just full. I don't know when I'm going to wear them, but I hate to give them away. If you keep them long enough, they come back in style again.

9. Because They Can

Finally, to round out an understanding of retention, we propose one more reason why people keep and perhaps accumulate things across the life course: because they can. Americans dwell in ever larger containers wherein the convenience of storage exceeds the inconvenience of decision making about one's goods. For example, the average size of new homes sold in the United States grew from 983 ft² in 1950 to 1,500 ft² in 1970 to 2,265 ft² in 2000 (National Association of Home Builders, 2001). One man recalled that he kept things just because he had the space:

When you live in a house for 48 years with the kind of room we had, you might say, “Oh, I might need that some day.” Clothes, for one thing, but other stuff, kitchen stuff. You know, even flower vases and all kinds of things.

The foregoing list of nine reasons for keeping things could be elaborated or condensed. As an instance of the latter, we could observe that people retain possessions for utilitarian, personal, or social reasons. Most of the nine reasons could also be marshaled to argue that people keep things to symbolize past, present, or future selves (Cross & Markus, 1991). Symbolization of the self has been a prominent finding in studies of the meaning of possessions that have used the cherished object method. Furby's (1978) conclusion that objects are possessed to control the environment and express the self has been replicated, for example, in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's (1981) 11 categories of meaning, Rubinstein's (1987) 7 categories of meaning, and Kamptner's (1989) 6 functions of objects. At the same time, considering the totality of household contents, not everything is important or significant to its owner. As one of our male respondents said, “As I was going through it, made me wonder why I kept all that stuff.”

When things have been lived with, when possessions help people control and act on their world, symbolize them, communicate things about them, create their identity, give aesthetic pleasure, stand by for future use, and represent people alive and deceased—how can owners let go of them? Possessions—a piece of jewelry, the box of Christmas decorations, an end table—may enclose such meaning that one is paralyzed with reflection upon their disposition. Yet our respondents did proceed to downsize their property under the pressure of a residential move.

FEATURES OF DISBANDMENT

Whereas previous studies of older people and possessions have considered the management of selected objects (e.g., Kalymun, 1985; Morris, 1992), this study focused on the entire project faced by elders who would disband a household. Our informants needed to imagine how they would establish housekeeping in a new, reduced space; imagine the disassembly of a material environment that they had arranged over a period of years; conceive strategies for decision making about, and disposition of, their belongings; anticipate who could be enlisted to help—and those were only the cognitive tasks. The work then had to get done. People found themselves addressing not just the contents of living areas, but also attics, basements, garages, sheds, and storage areas. Furniture, appliances, and significant heirlooms merited evident attention, but there was also reckoning with categories that each contained hundreds of items, such as clothes, books, tools, foodstuffs, seasonal decorations, kitchen and dining utensils, records, and documents. Even people with energy, time, and resources found this a daunting undertaking.

Our interviews did not directly touch on disposition of the most obvious possession: the dwelling itself. Over time, the dwelling is likely to have been developed, modified, or shaped to the needs of its occupants—to reflect them (Dant, 1999). Participants who lived in houses told us about the work they had put into the place and their feelings about the way it had been sold or valued. The home as a “thing” and leave-taking from it are topics that deserve full study in their own right.

At the outset of our interviews, we were prepared to hear about a consistent “type” of disbandment. In standard form, the activity would commence once a move seemed quite probable, the household would shed a good number of items, and the activity would more or less conclude once one was settled in the new place. We did hear about this type, but there were a number of variations, such as when significant disbandment continued after the move. Two households had selected items for and moved into smaller quarters but had not yet emptied and sold their old houses. Another woman had a large quantity of things in storage because she had thought that she might “move up” to a larger unit within her retirement community, but now was satisfied with her one-bedroom apartment. In a second variation, a widow, who had been married more than once, had been living among what were essentially her late husband’s possessions. When she moved, she took only personal things and left the house and contents to a stepson. A third variation saw minimal disbandment. This couple moved into a house only half the size of their former place but claimed that they could bring most of their things because they had routinely been thinning belongings over the last few years.

The general sequence of disbandment is this: People first decided what major items to retain; next, especially meaningful belongings were gifted to family members and others; then, the remaining stock was evaluated for further keeping, sale, donation, or discard. Oftentimes, family and social networks were mobilized to assist the decision-making and physical tasks. This process played out over a period of time. In our interviews, we made an effort to establish how much time there was “to get ready for the move,” often repeating the answer back for confirmation. Of the 30 households, 8 disbanded in 1 month or less, and altogether 25 disbanded in 3 months or less, with 2 months being most frequent. The longer periods occurred while

waiting for admission to a retirement community. Shorter periods had a more intense pace of activity: “Well, we had to really move—2 months—we had to keep going every day.” Disposition activities, as we have noted, at times anticipated the disbandment period and stretched on afterward.

We prompted people to begin their disbandment accounts by asking, “Were you able to bring everything with you?” Their initial responses revealed the priority of “the larger stuff” in people’s cognitive organization of disbandment. Major furniture led many accounts, either what was retained or what was let go. These items included beds, dressers, chairs, tables, dining sets, televisions, and large appliances. Utility and spatial fit were also decision factors in Kalymun’s (1985) study of living room contents among older women who had recently moved.

Some movers found that a floor plan of the new place had been a helpful tool for decision making:

I just measured the place inch by inch to find out what I could bring and how it would fit. I had it all visualized before I came in. And decided what I wanted to take. There were a few things I might have taken but I didn’t. But basically this was what I needed [gestures to the room]. ... I even measured to see what the piano would take up, that was the main thing, that was the biggest piece of furniture. And this table has leaves, I kept the leaves, and I took a small bed, got rid of my queen bed. I just measured it all to be sure it would fit.

Aside from the priority of big furniture, disbandment accounts proceeded in quite a variable way, touching on the various methods of distribution that we discuss in the next section. Certain contexts seemed to color the project, chief among them the experience of recent health problems, whether one was married or recently widowed, and the relative control over the proceedings exerted by family members who might have been active or entirely absent. Stage of later life was also a context for disbandment. Some households were making their second postretirement move, sometimes as widowed persons, and characteristically to yet smaller dwellings than first-time disbanders. Thus, although disbandment can be a one-time event, it can also be a sequence of episodes, which we should expect if there is, indeed, a developmental pattern to residential change and migration in later life (Litwak & Longino, 1987).

METHODS OF DISPOSITION

For belongings that are not retained, elders disband with four principal means of extramural disposition: gifts, sale, charitable donation, and discard.

Gifts to Others

Gifts occupied relatively more narrative space in people’s accounts of disbandment, though there is no way to know whether more things were given away than were donated, sold, or thrown out. Perhaps people took more time with gift stories because these things were now a point of intersection with the lives of others or because the afterlife or whereabouts of things made a good tale. Perhaps their absence still holds a “presence” for the giver (Hetherington, 2004). Family members were a primary outlet for excess belongings, but we also heard about gifts to friends and neighbors, sometimes in return for help with disbandment and moving. Careful transfers could ensure continuity in the cherishing or use of things, thereby fulfilling a responsibility toward objects with which one has a relationship. People expressed this at times by saying that their things had found a “home.” One couple gave their large, artificial Christmas tree to a young family, a solution “that was an answer to prayer, to have that go to someone who loves it.” Another woman, who moved from a house with seven rooms and full basement to a three-room apartment in assisted living, told us:

Ok, the things I gave away were the things I knew would be used. ... I gave away most of my kitchen things, because I can't bake [the apartment has no oven]. I have a nephew who is in his first apartment, so he took a lot of my baking things. I felt good about that. I tried to give away things that people would use in the way of furniture and furnishings.

Anthropologic views about gifts emphasize how they maintain social ties and create reciprocal obligations (Mauss, 1990; Schwartz, 1967). Gift-giving, then, can entail a certain amount of calculation. In his observations of *casser maison*, Marcoux (2001) interpreted elders' gifts to others as a way to donate, perpetuate, or ancestralize themselves. In our study, there were instances when the intentionality of gifts was very near the surface. Some things were truly conferred, as this man described his wife's stock of china:

Well, she gave one complete set of dishes, her mother's Bavarian china, to her daughter-in-law. And she has two sets of Haviland, other sets of dishes, and one set goes to her daughter.

People also told us of having made lists that would direct the distribution of specific objects in the future.

There were other sorts of giveaways that people did not dwell on that seemed less calculated. There were numerous accounts of family and friends having (as our informants put it) "taken" things. The things that others took seemed not so much conferred as gratefully off-loaded, as with this disposition of plants:

All my flowers that I had there—I go to St. Martha's—one of the ladies there is a master gardener. And I told her. And she said she would take everything.

Some gifts were half-given, half-retained in an exchange akin to archiving. One's things were placed with others with the understanding that they could be accessed or visited in the future. One man had his collection of beer cans, 400 in all, at his son's house. Another man told us:

We had the cash register from my father's hardware store, almost 100 years old. Everyone loved that cash register; worked just fine. They played with it. That's at my friend's house. *We love having it there* [emphasis added]. We don't have any room for a cash register.

One risk in conferring special gifts on some is that others may feel slighted and perceive an inequity, but we heard little of that. The more common hazard of gifts, and one that we did encounter, is that intended recipients will not want the things that are proffered. "No, they didn't want any of it. They have all they want." "They already have a house full." If belongings that are invested with one's identity do not find heirs or interest among friends, the failure to place them could be a source of grief (Marcoux, 2001; Marx et al., 2004).

Sale

All but seven of the households in our study sold things as a method of disposition. It would be a laborious undertaking to try to realize the market value of every item that is potentially salable. A 74-year-old woman, who did not sell things, explained: "My neighbor asked me why I didn't have a garage sale, but I didn't want to deal with it, itemizing and pricing everything, so I just donated it." Though we did not hear about significant profits, the money realized from sales did matter to our informants, especially for defraying costs of their move. One practical advantage of sales, even with nominal returns, is that buyers were now obligated to remove the items from one's property.

Some people were quite strategic in their approach, concluding direct sales of specific objects using newspaper advertisements, consignment stores, and even the Internet auction site, eBay. More commonly, elders offered things for sale in their own garage or yard sales or by joining

in sales held by relatives and neighbors. In talking about these dispositions, people would summarize, recounting how batches or categories of things (e.g., tools, hobby materials) “went in the sale.”

Eight households sold things through, or guided by, agents such as appraisers, estate sellers, or antique dealers. Such professionals were appreciated for realizing more profitable sales. The agent for one couple sold bookcases for \$1,000 apiece when the owners had thought they were worth only \$150 to \$200. Reflecting on the professional's role:

This lady is good at what she does. And she knows quite a number of people in the business of collectibles primarily that the average person would not have access to at all, or if they did, it would take a lot of gumshoe work. You would have to sort through a lot of things and make a lot of calls. The owner doesn't have to do it. . . . It would have been a terrible traumatic strain to have to do all of the labor, bickering and bargaining and planning the whole thing. We were relieved of all the what I call mental anguish.

Although agents were generally prized for unlocking more value, they could also devalue things. One woman, whose illness precluded her active involvement in some aspects of the move, had an estate seller handle some china, “but I went over there and she had \$5 apiece on each item, broke my heart.”

Charitable Donations

To the extent that there is a hierarchy of disposition, donations are residual to gifts and sales. What was not wanted or did not sell, our informants passed along to community agencies (Salvation Army and Goodwill were most frequently mentioned), church organizations, veterans groups, arts organizations, libraries, museums, a historical society, and the humane society (one dog). Donations might be directed to public sales or thrift shops whose proceeds would then benefit the organization, for example, book sales at public libraries.

As with interpersonal gifts, there was satisfaction in knowing that things would be used:

Well, anything that I ever kept that I thought was still useable I brought to Brooks Center, where the street people could have them. They give things away there to the street people.

Some things were intentionally placed in ways that would ensure a continuity of appreciation by new owners and communicate the values of the giver: a collection of Christmas crèches to a church with an annual festival of crèches, a 20-ft ladder to Habitat for Humanity, and this from a woman married for 54 years:

I will tell you one thing that was sentimental: I got rid of my wedding gown. I don't know why I saved it all these years, but I took it to what they call the Share House, down in the poor part of [the city], and the lady said, “Oh, some bride will really be looking for this.”

Yet not all charitable donations were meaningful placements. To some, it was a simple convenience, and tax deductible at that. Asked about donations, one man replied:

Oh, a little bit. I considered that in the throw-away pile—you throw it away to VFW or the American Legion post. One of the ladies who knows my wife is very involved with rummage sales. She got some stuff, but I consider that throw-away.

Other Means

People discard things that they cannot give, sell, or donate. Our informants did not tend to make extensive comments about this means of disposal, often referring to the items in terms

of their quantity (“a lot of stuff,” “not much stuff”). Exactly how these things left their possession also merited little comment other than to say that items were “got rid of,” “thrown away,” or “put out.” These had been, heretofore, things somehow worth keeping that the disbandment process had redefined and residualized. “Trash,” observes Strasser (1999), “is created by sorting. ... Nothing is inherently trash” (p. 5). Disbandment disclosed that these leftovers were not useful to anyone (e.g., excess food), not salable (“possums were making a nest in it”), too personal to entrust to others (e.g., papers, records), or simply of limited interest, even to family. In this last regard, two households said nearly the same thing about stored photographs.

One of the things in the throw-away column that gives people a lot of trouble, and us, too, is pictures. They have no value to anyone else but who is in them.

We had some pictures of old aunts and uncles that are no longer around and their kids aren't around, so we disposed of them. ... People we don't know and never will.

Yet even upon dismissing things from their lives, some people still had to linger with them. Hetherington (2004) discusses a provisional and final disposal that is akin to the first and second burial practiced in some cultures. One man talked about a box containing things that had belonged to his father: “Just going through so much in a short time, do you really toss it? Do you want to look at it once more?” Another man told us that a “truckload” of papers went “in the dump.” The interviewer followed up:

Interviewer: Did that involve going through files one folder at a time?

Respondent: Yes it did.

Interviewer: Was that time consuming?

Respondent: It was a good thing. You give some of them up; some combined; some of them brought back memories. By and large we've had a pretty good life. Good memories.

And with some disposals, a little bit of the possible self may have been discarded, too: “I threw a lot of things away, things I was going to do things with.”

Other miscellaneous disposition methods included selling items such as appliances (or just leaving them) to the new owners of one's house or having relatives retrieve items that the elder had been holding for them. Belongings also went into storage with family (e.g., a son's basement) or at a commercial facility, but that did not prove wholly satisfactory in some cases because stored belongings became relatively inaccessible and were vulnerable to damage or theft.

DISCUSSION

When older people prepare to move to smaller quarters in later life, they confront an accumulation of possessions that needs to be reduced, a project that we term “disbandment.” These possessions were acquired and kept for various reasons, ranging from everyday convenience to deep sentiment. Their deaccumulation is a practical chore that addresses the contents of the household: thousands of items lodged in multiple rooms. It is also an emotional chore that addresses the contents of the self. “A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as parts of ourselves” (Belk, 1988, p. 139). Disbandment, then, is often about more than the simple repositioning of objects. If successfully accomplished, this complex task

exemplifies a strategic, adaptive style of aging described by the Baltes' model of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

The recent movers in our study had disassembled their households over a typical period of 2 months, but the pace of disposition was quite variable. The initial steps of disbandment involved decisions about major furniture and meaningful gifts to family and friends. What followed was an evaluation of the remaining belongings for retention, sale, further gifts, donation, or discard. Things not divested by one means (e.g., things that did not sell) were reassigned to another strategy. Our informants took particular pleasure in dispositions that would see their things used, cared for, and valued as they had done, thus discharging a responsibility to their belongings.

Disbandment is an acute episode of a more general, ongoing process whereby people manage a flow of possessions through their lives. Facing a move, our informants had engaged in a time-limited project that “called the question” about the value of their entire stock of things. The study of such whole-house breakups (e.g., Marcoux, 2001) opens a new angle of vision on the topic of older people's relationship to possessions. The literature contains extensive commentary about the meaning of things, almost all of it generated by asking respondents about their most cherished or important possessions. This method—a focus on selected items—makes the study of possessions tractable, but it also accentuates the preciousness of things. The households in our study did retain or pass on valued objects, and there were lively accounts about this activity. At the same time, people owned a lot of, well, *stuff* that had become problematic due to the impending move. Some of these holdings had been kept for fairly mundane reasons. Upon disposition, people told us how things were “taken” by others, “went” in the sale, or “got rid of.” Sales devalued things, and proffered gifts went unwanted. Some things, in the end, were fit only for the trash. Disbandment creates an encounter with sets of objects that have been invested with more or less meaning by their owners. What our study revealed is that disbandment, as it unfolds, also remakes the meaning of things. In a similar way, Marx and colleagues (2004) have shown how divestments can reveal and shift an object's location in a matrix of mutual value among self, family, and the marketplace.

The revised meaning of things and the mutual implication of self and possessions raise a question that deserves follow-up: How do people decathect things (Sherman & Newman, 1977–78)? This report has described how people disband, but there should be further scrutiny of the attitudinal shifts that let owners marginalize and dismiss the things that they had been keeping (Hetherington, 2004). If things are indeed an extension of the self (Belk, 1988; Furby, 1978), how, and how readily, does the self reform on a smaller base of things? The ability to dismiss possessions has a significant clinical implication for people trapped by their things who may need to move to more functional housing but cannot manage, nay begin, the task of disbandment.

In earlier passages, we noted the importance of studying disbandments in process, as well as the dwelling from which the movers depart, a possession that they are likely to have cultivated (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Other extensions of this work to larger and more diverse samples could compare disbandment practices across social groups and across later life. Is there ongoing possession management in anticipation of disbandment (Morris, 1992) so that people become practiced at dispositions? What voluntary deaccumulations occur among the larger group of people that does not move? Finally, such investigations could be informed by the expertise of everyday parties to disbandment, such as estate sellers, auctioneers, donation agencies, move-in coordinators at retirement communities, moving companies, and self-storage operators.

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