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Family things: Attending the household disbandment of older adults

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Abstract

When adults move to smaller quarters in later life, family members become involved in the management and disposal of possessions—some cherished, some mundane. Interviews were conducted with 14 family members who had participated in a household disbandment by elders. This qualitative analysis describes the various tasks that were undertaken by family members; how family members asserted themselves in the process; how they were an outlet for possessions; the way that some possessions are shared; and implications for family's story about itself. Household disbandment is a field for all sorts of family practices that can be summarized along three continua that characterize (1) the receiving of goods, (2) the location of agency between elder and family members, and (3) family's self-understanding.

Keywords

Household disbandment; Receiving of goods; Location of agency; Family's self-understanding

Household disbandment is the activity that people undertake to reduce the volume of their possessions in the course of a residential move (Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, & Bowen, 2004). Although household disbandment can happen across the life course its occurrence in later life is notable for three reasons. First, it is necessary. Most older people, when they move, occupy smaller quarters (National Association of Home Builders, 2001) and so cannot take all their things, setting off a process of dispossession that is compressed into only a few weeks or months. Second, it is comprehensive, addressing the contents of the whole household and not just selected items. Third, the transition may be liminal to mortality, undertaken as a concession to age-related vulnerability.

Disbandment has physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, of which the social primarily concerns us here. When elders are present for the disbandment—they direct it or have agency in it—the process is also likely to implicate other people. Most obviously, family, friends, neighbors, and paid employees can help with or even assume the various tasks involved. Disbandment also implicates others because possessions are ineluctably social (Dant, 1999). Their monetary value is a social judgment. They symbolize and mediate others (e.g., gifts, heirlooms). Possessions are acquired and kept as means to present oneself to others, in consideration of the opinion of others, and at the suggestion of others (Appadurai, 1986; Douglas & Isherwood, 1996). Their ownership is sometimes shared with others. There is indeed little personal or private property that does not have others “in” the things, and so the dispositions of such possessions are acts with social significance.

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Although the wider world may reside in one's possessions and may become involved upon their disposition, here we limit our attention to the role of family members in household disbandment by elders. When focusing upon the elder's own agency in motivating and accomplishing disbandment, we have elsewhere said (Ekerdt et al., 2004) that these activities are fruitfully viewed as an instance of the adaptive initiative described by the Baltes' model of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes, 1997; Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995). When family members figure in a household disbandment, there may be a number of ways to theorize their involvement. Family members who receive property and possessions may be a vehicle for the continuity of individual identity (Marcoux, 2001) or the conservation of ancestral stories (Pratt & Fiese, 2004). When family helps with the process, it may be a way of discharging the filial obligation that arises from gratitude for past support, or it may be offered in the hope or expectation of benefit (Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). Family participation could be an expression of intergenerational solidarity and support (Parrott & Bengtson, 1999; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), or even be seen as an episode of caregiving (Walker, Pratt, & Eddy, 1995).

The familial role in household disbandment has only been described in a limited way. Although there is a considerable literature about elders and their possessions, most of it is centered on cherished possessions and their meaning to elders. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Furby (1978) had an early influence on this genre, outlining the ways that people value things for their utility and symbolism. In contrast to this research, where the position of things is static and their meaning fixed, a smaller number of studies has addressed the way that older people might actually divest themselves of belongings (Hunter & Rowles, 2005; Marcoux, 2001; Marx, Solomon, & Miller, 2004; Morris, 1992; Price, Arnould, & Folkman Curasi, 2000; Stum, 1999, 2000). Here the involvement of others, primarily family members, is almost wholly about the giving and receiving of belongings. These qualitative studies describe how elders may invite others to choose among their things; how heirlooms that represent family continuity tend to receive first consideration in gift dispositions; and how elders use cherished possessions to create a legacy among kin, in effect transmitting or memorializing themselves. What is interesting about these property transmissions is that they can test the meaning of things and the nature of intergenerational ties. When the presumed values of things and ties are not borne out, failed exchanges can be painful (Marcoux, 2001; Marx et al., 2004). In addition, distributions that are perceived to be inequitable can cause trouble among family members (Stum, 1999).

In this article, we will open further the familial dimension of household disbandment in three ways. First, we will describe the ways that family members involve themselves in the process of dispossession. In what other capacities do they function besides as the receivers of goods? Second, we have an interest not just in the management of special possessions, but in the whole-house task of disbandment. Third, we follow family members' points of view on these proceedings, which is a novel approach among previous studies that heretofore have reported things exclusively from the elder's perspective.

To characterize family involvement, we favor the term "attend" because it encompasses shades of engagement from passive to active. To attend might mean to turn up, to be present, to witness, to accompany, to wait upon, or even care for. Here we will describe how family attends the household disbandment of elders in the various tasks they undertake, the level of family agency, the way that family members are an outlet for possessions, the way that some possessions are familial, and disbandment's contribution to the family story.

1. Methods

In 2002 and 2003 we interviewed elders in 30 households who had moved in the previous year, either within or to the region of a mid-sized Midwestern city. In some cases these were couples (8), single men (5) or single women (17). We located these volunteers by posting flyers in congregate housing sites, by soliciting in the community generally, and by word-of-mouth referrals. We screened volunteers to be over the age of 60 who had moved to a smaller household and who had been functionally able to participate in the move. These respondents ranged in age from 60 to 87 and had come from diverse occupational backgrounds. They had moved from and into various types of housing, but in all cases the new place had less space. Further detail about these individuals and the circumstances of their moves can be found in Ekerdt et al. (2004).

We asked elders to identify someone who had helped with the transition so that we could “get some additional perspective” on the move. In the 16 households that gave us referrals, all were family members, and we completed interviews with 14. In relation to the elders, there were eight daughters, four sons, one brother, and one granddaughter. Table 1 lists these relationships along with elders’ characteristics and the nature of the old and new residence. None of the elders had moved in with family. The family members were interviewed locally (in their homes, places of work, the buildings where their relatives lived) or over the telephone if they did not live in the state or region. That each had been the primary helper through the disbandment was apparent over the course of the interviews with elders.

In those households where elders did not refer us to such second informants, the main reason was that the individual or couple had disbanded without the sustained involvement of family or friends. Family, friends, and sales agents certainly appeared in elders’ narratives. But, after having been interviewed for 1 or 2 h, they could not recommend someone who was familiar with their experience in any detail. These “independent” disbanders were more likely to be younger, healthier, and making a first postretirement move, a pattern suggested by Litwak and Longino’s (1987) typology of moves.

Audiotaped interviews with family members followed the same format as those with elders, and focused on the disbandment period—the breaking up of the household in the months or weeks prior to the move. Elders had reported that this period lasted from one week to several months with two months being most common. We asked family members about decision making and disposition of possessions, about their interaction with the elder(s), and about their feelings throughout. Family members also frequently discussed the longer process of discernment leading up to the move. Our interviews did not cross-inform, i.e., tell family members what the elder had said.

Three interviewers, including the first author, conducted the interviews and generated notes that served as the first level of qualitative 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; Silverman, 2001). The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and the authors coded them 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.

2. Findings

This report is based primarily on the information from family members without a formal attempt to correlate detail between the elder–family pair. In the first place, we did not use closed-end questions whose responses could be matched. More importantly, the long tradition of dyadic research emphasizes the likelihood of different perspectives and interests between a pair of individuals (Thompson & Walker, 1982). Though asked about the same disbandment process, the parties focused on different experience.

Compared to our interviews with elders who had moved, family members were less invested in their elders' possessions and disposition. The fate of the possessions was of secondary importance to the accomplishment of the move itself. Most family members felt that the move had been necessary to make their elders' lives simpler, more manageable, and more protected. Family's larger interest in the accomplishment of the move is shown by the response of one daughter in our sample. Having just described the disposition of various possessions, the interviewer specifically asked about "some kinds of things that were harder for your parents to deal with than others." In reply, the daughter, Ms. A, switched focus to the larger project:

Oh, I don't know. I think the hardest part of the whole move was getting my dad moved. He was a diehard—convincing him it's time to move on. That was hard on my mom. I think more than anything, the emotional stuff. Once it was all done and over, it was such a relief. I think the emotional drama of getting it over with was more grueling than anything.

Family members were also less voluble about dispossession because their encounter with the belongings was intermittent, whereas the elder had accumulated and kept them for their utility or symbolic meaning (Ekerdt et al., 2004), and now lived among them during the disbandment. When we asked about categories of items (e.g., clothes, kitchen utensils), a number of family respondents did not actually know what had become of many things.

Nevertheless, family members easily recognized disbandment as both necessary and as a significant event. When we asked if their mothers, fathers, or relatives had wanted to take everything with them, the replies acknowledged the need to downsize. Family members said, yes, their parents had wanted to take it all but could not; no, there was no way they could have taken it all; or reported that there had been a lot of stuff to get rid of. "She had a lot of stuff! ...like, stuff. I don't know where she got it all" (Ms. B).

2.1. Tasks undertaken

Family accounts of the process were contingent on the intensity of their engagement across the disbandment period. The minimum involvement was a single weekend; the maximum was almost daily help over periods up to two months. Some of our informants lived nearby while some had traveled from several states away to help. Some reported on the process in a detached way, but some had worked side by side, "piece by piece" with their elders and favored the first person plural in describing the process. And it is well to remember that each disbandment might have been attended by family members (and friends) other than the ones that were referred to us for interview.

The general sequence of disbandment was reported in a similar way by elders and family members. People first made decisions on the retention of major items of furniture, then gave

meaningful belongings to family and others, then evaluated the remaining stock for further keeping, sale, donation, or the final residualization of items as garbage or trash (Ekerdt et al., 2004). Ms. C described her parents' procedure this way:

Respondent: I think anything that had been passed down to them, if they decided they didn't want it anymore, my sister-in-law and I got to decide if we wanted it. And if we didn't, then we sold it. Anything that they didn't want, we really had first choice if we wanted it. I think space also determines what you can and can't take. If you have a dining room at one place and not the other, then you have to get rid of the dining room set.

Interviewer: Did they have to get rid of the dining room set?

Respondent: Yes, they did.

Interviewer: Did they have to throw away anything besides garbage?

Respondent: No, not really. Probably what we didn't sell at the garage sale we took to the Goodwill or wherever, but we didn't actually just throw it away.

A son, Mr. D, who moved his mother described a similar sequence:

Interviewer: Did you have to throw anything away?

Respondent: Yes, we did.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything besides trash?

Respondent: Paint supplies, maybe some cupboards that nobody wanted to buy.

Interviewer: So everything after the estate sale?

Respondent: We either decided what we wanted to keep or throw away or donate to the Goodwill.

Among the many tasks that they undertook, family members plotted out space in the new residence in order to plan the fit for furniture. They helped sort things. In the view of all but three respondents, their elders wanted to retain more than they could. "Yes, a lot of things had to be sorted through and no, she didn't want to get rid of anything" (Ms. E). In the course of sorting, family could prod or object to certain dispositions. One woman was assisted by her granddaughter throughout a hurried, one-week disbandment. We asked Ms. B if there had been disagreements about what to do with things, and she said:

Respondent: Sometimes. She wanted to keep everything and I'd tell her some of the stuff wasn't useful, so we got into some arguments. I don't know.

Interviewer: Can you think of a specific thing?

Respondent: No, she just wanted to keep everything, and I probably yelled at her because I was, like, "Grandma, you can't keep it all." I think everyone else was more patient.

Family members located packing boxes and filled them. They talked of "lugging stuff around." Asked if anything was thrown away, Ms. F said:

Oh yes, threw a lot of things away. I think when my nieces and nephews were there we filled a good 100 bags of stuff that we went through and threw away. And we took a lot of stuff down to the Goodwill, I bet three or four trunk loads. And she had a lot of stuff that she wanted to take all over and donate.

Family members received and stored things (a topic we address in the next section). They evaluated items for sale and priced them, staffed and sometimes managed yard sales. In one

case, a daughter talked her mother into paying for movers. Another daughter cajoled her father into using an estate seller. The same daughter had to arrange for some one to take the cat (“I think [the cat] was one reason why it took him so long to move out of his house”). Family became involved in selling the house, cleaning and painting it. They lined up movers or did it themselves. At the new place, they helped unpack, arrange furniture, hang pictures. And after the move was over they were called upon for the “collaborative memory” (Dixon, 1996) of what went where:

Every now and then she will call and ask me what happened to such and such, and I will remind her that we sold it in the estate sale or I have it or Martha took it. Some of those things she has asked about she still has in boxes in her apartment. (Mr. D)

Family members did not explain how this assistance was mobilized. Our interviews did not directly ask about the matter, so we do not know to what extent elders solicited help, or family offered first, or how recruitment occurred within the network of kin. Family involvement could be substantial. Mr. G had moved his mother twice over a period of three years. In the first move, from the family home of 30 years, both parents were alive.

Well, it was the whole family, all the siblings: my wife and I, my sister and her husband who live in Missouri, and my brother and his wife who live in Nebraska. At various times we were all there getting ready, and then we were all there for the actual move. It was the usual thing. The house needed to go on the market—we discovered all these things that needed to be done at the last minute. An influx of family members came to help, it was pretty crazy.

Later, when his widowed mother moved again, “We had all the family members involved. At one time or another, we would take turns going for the weekend.” In most of the cases that we studied, the awareness had developed over months or years that a move was inevitable, and so help with the disbandment may have been the logical next step in an unfolding career of caregiving (Pearlin and Aneshensel, 1994).

Another way that family aided disbandment was by attending to elders’ emotions. Not only was there the complexity and confusion of the move, there could be underlying issues about the loss of home and health. Several elders were recent widows and also dealing with their husband’s things. One son (Mr. D) observed that the move was largely under control, yet:

Respondent: I think it was under control, it’s just that what made it overwhelming is the sense of loss. This was their home for so many years. There is no more home to go to.

Interviewer: Do you think [your mother] feels like that, too?

Respondent: I don’t think she feels like that now. At the time, yes. I think still intellectually she feels good about her decision. Emotionally, it’s hard to leave a home after so many years. Another thing is, I think, it is hard to admit you can no longer maintain a house like that.

2.2. Assist or assert

As noted earlier, the households from which we secured family interviews needed somewhat more assistance than households that had not had family in close attendance. Yet, even within this sample, family members were about evenly divided in describing their role in the disbandment process. In eight cases, family members left almost all agency to the elder and described a collaborative style of interaction and decision making (Baltes & Carstensen, 1999; Hummert and Morgan, 2001). In the other six cases, family members asserted themselves into the sorting and packing. This greater paternalism, usually apparent when elders were more frail, can be seen as arising from the structured ambivalence of the filial role (Connidis &

McMullin, 2002; Pillemer & Luscher, 2004). Family members know that the elder should have autonomy but should also be protected, an ambivalence that they proceed to resolve.

Family members who had adopted the hands-off, helper role explained their stance in response to our question about the advice they would give to others. In reply, they said: Be respectful and let parents decide. Besides: “There is no way you can do that for someone else. You can’t tell your parents what to keep.” Ms. A counseled patience even though she seems tempted to have taken a stronger hand:

Have a lot of patience. If [others] are helping their parents move, let [parents] kind of set their own pace, because when you try to rush, they often get overwhelmed, I think. They raised us and have been at it a lot longer than we have. And even though we all want to give them advice, it’s best to let them decide what they are going to take. And don’t push on them what you think they should take and what they should leave behind because it’s a real personal thing. It’s a real personal thing, and what’s important to them may not be important to you. So I think just a lot of prayer and patience and tolerance. I really learned a lot through it. It’s a major step in their lives; it’s a turning point. For me, I had to bite my tongue.

By contrast, several of our respondents described having intervened strongly in the disbandment. Ms. E asserted her authority to do so:

My goal was to make [mother] do without and make it so that she wasn’t so jam-packed up there that no one could turn around. So there was a medium ground there. If it bothered her, she got over it.

She described her procedure:

There were other things, like boxes of jeans that she had in her mind that someday she was going to make a patchwork jean thing, whatever it was, I don’t know. Well, I got rid of those. She hadn’t had any time invested in it yet, then I didn’t keep it. But if it was something that she actually invested time in, then I tried to keep that. But there were limits.

Another daughter, Ms. H, described extensive involvement.

We just had to kind of go piece by piece. Or I would recommend, “Oh, Dad, you might need some towels. Dad you will probably need some pillows.” It was really where I had to do a lot of the deciding. Some of it he knew, like clothes-wise, of course the clothes he would need and his toiletries and his medication. He was more geared toward the daily, everyday stuff, where I was thinking long-range things. You’re going to need a rain coat. You’re going to need an umbrella. You’re going to need—you know.

Sometimes the helper challenged the elder’s decisions: You don’t have space for that, you can’t keep it all. In a house “filled to the brim with stuff,” Ms. F recalled:

We had to go through all sorts of stuff to get what she needed. My problem was that she literally did want to take everything. And I kept saying, “Mother, we don’t have room for this.” And so she finally did make her decisions. Because the sale was delayed she kept going back, and this was extraordinarily painful for her because she wanted to pick up more stuff. So I finally said to her “Mother, you know I’m probably going to be all along getting rid of this stuff.”

Getting rid of things without telling the elder was the far extent of arrogation. These were two accounts about the clandestine disposal of food and clothes:

Well, my niece and I sorted out her food and took a lot of canned goods that we thought were good, then we threw out a lot of stuff. If she had been there, we would have kept more. (Ms. F)

At the other house, [mother] had an extra bedroom and two big closets just jammed full of her clothes. So she took as many as she could get by with taking. If it had a stain on it, I would throw it away if she wasn't looking. I didn't care; she had had it for 30 years. If she saw it, then that was a different story, then I had to give it to her. So I had to employ a few secret tactics. But no, she didn't take all her clothes with her. (Ms. E)

Family assertion of control, even if it ruffled elder's feelings, was justified on the grounds of necessity. One daughter allowed that her father regretted losing his lawn and garden tools, "but that's ok—he shouldn't be doing much anyway." Another woman put a large back bar up for sale, and it sold for only \$1400, which was about a third of the amount expected. Her mother "was not happy with all of that," but "I felt we needed to get things over and done."

Some of this paternalism has to be evaluated in light of family's larger interest in accomplishing the move, which they in turn might regard as part of a longer caregiving career (Cicarelli, 1992). Family claimed to have motivated some moves in order to relocate elders to a more protected and secure environment. Ms. H rationalized her executive role in the process by looking forward to the next disbandment:

I just don't want him having a bunch of stuff stockpiled where he is now because I'm going to have to do it again. Being the only [child], you start thinking, "I'm it." So you have to think ahead.

Not surprisingly, more assertive family members also described the experience as having been more stressful. Again, intense involvement was more likely with the elder in frail health. In addition to direct admission that the experience was emotional or overwhelming, family members recalled incidents of exasperation with elders.

I think another difficult thing was that mother was attached to all her things and she had a story about everything that we packed. So we had to listen to a nonstop story of her talking all the time, and that's very tough to be around. (Ms. F)

Ms. H was frustrated by her father's pulling things out of the trash or retrieving things that she had assigned for sale.

He really wanted a saucepan that my mother used. It was the one thing he was carting around in his car. And I asked, why in the world? You don't have a stove, why do you have a saucepan? So anyway he has a saucepan. He put it in his car without me knowing until I cleaned out his trunk. ... I just about blew a gasket.

2.3. The family outlet

Aside from physical help, extra know-how, emotional support, and additional judgment, family is a major outlet for excess possessions. Whereas the literature on older people and possessions tends to focus on selected, cherished objects and the possibility of their transmittal within the family, household disbandment encompasses large quantities of mundane items that also are candidates for placement with kin. As Ms. E observed, "She didn't have to turn loose a whole lot of furniture, but she had to turn loose a lot of little teeny-tiny things that she had gotten."

In the view of family members, things changed hands by varied initiative: they were offered, taken, obligated, and stored. The first strategy has elders making a general offer of things that kin can claim. Such possessions tend to be meaningful objects meant to "stay in the family,"

and Morris (1992) notes this as the beginning of an active divestiture. Mr. I described the strategy exactly:

They had accumulated a lot of these collector plates over the years. They had quite a few of these, so they gave the family the opportunity to take any of these they were interested in, and the leftovers were sold.

Likewise, Ms. A talked about her mother's collections and decorations, and their partial distribution to the family.

Respondent: She started collecting miniatures as a child and I have a lot of those, but either I kept them or she pretty much dispersed them between my sisters and I. But she still has any real important collectibles, I would say. It all stayed in the family, but she has most of them.

Interviewer: Seasonal materials?

Respondent: She kept most of it, as far as Christmas decorations. Or if they were personalized, like my Aunt Jane used to make, out of Styrofoam balls—she would take and make each of our names out of sequins. She [mom] gave each of us our own. Mom kept the others.

Mr. G accepted some of his parent's books:

They were very concerned about them going to good homes. They had a favorite author in Arizona, and they had signed editions of all his books. I kept those. Although I never met the author I knew how much it meant to my parents.

Other possessions changed hands less intentionally—were “taken” in exchanges that might have been more matters of convenience than meaningfully bestowed. Ms. B recalled the list of things that she and her family took: two trunks, a small dresser, an armoire, some chairs, a bed frame, a grandfather clock, an organ, some ornaments. About the ornaments: “We aren't going to use them, but we have them.” Ms. H acquired a picnic table, most of the heirlooms, some records and documents, an antique telephone, CDs, and most of the bibles. Ms. D took her dad's tools and things from his workshop, and her sister “took some small kitchen appliances, things like that.” Disbandment is also the opportunity for elders to return things they had been holding for kin. Said Ms. B, “One of her bedrooms was kind of my storage. She had stuff of mine. But I took most of that home with me.”

Elders could offer things with a somewhat stronger obligation to take them because they were family things. “Would you like this, it was your grandma's?” Such a situation could be awkward, according to Mr. G:

You almost felt you had to take things. She would ask: “Do you want this? It belonged to your father.” You didn't want some things because it was junk, but on the other hand it belonged to your dad and you didn't want to hurt mom's feelings.

Things might also be stored with family members but elders had not quite ceded their possession. One woman was keeping her mother's papers and records; another woman had some oversized tapestry pictures in storage at her home. One family had half a basement devoted to storing their mother's excess things against the possibility that she might move to a larger unit at her retirement community. Some storage was described as provisional to eventual ownership, as with this piece of furniture:

Probably she didn't care about anything that she left behind except a kind of curio cabinet that her brother made. There was just not room for that, and that's at my house. But the reason I say it's there, I'm not really storing it for her because there is no way she will be able to have it back. But yet it's still hers. (Ms. E)

This curio cabinet could be the special variant of storage that we called “archiving” in our earlier report from this project (Ekerdt et al., 2004), where an elder places things with others with the understanding that they will be accessed or visited in the future.

The family outlet, however, is not always open. Family members can refuse to accept proffered gifts. We heard about refusals more frequently from elders than from family members. The family members that elders referred to us for interview had been generally helpful and accommodating, and so less likely to have refused gifts. Elders could also have offered gifts to a wider circle of family, increasing the incidence of both acceptances and refusals. Nevertheless, the family members that we interviewed did not take everything. One man was unable to take his sister’s piano, which she then had to sell. Ms. F called a halt to taking things from her mother.

Respondent: Well, she was kind of disappointed, but I didn’t want any more stuff. I’m not a big stuff person and so I have been minimizing my stuff for a long time. And my brother didn’t want anything, even though he came and I asked him if he wanted anything.

Interviewer: Do you think that was hard for her?

Respondent: Yes, I think the fact that neither of us wanted anything or took anything bothered her.

Nothing illuminated the value of the family outlet more than when it was not available. One of the elders to whom we talked was a single woman, never married, with no close family. She was among our respondents who had no substantial family help with disbandment. Friends had helped her move, as had a brother and two nieces who drove from some distance to assist her over two separate weekends. She said that she had not had the energy to keep up with her helpers owing to health problems and her depression. When asked about gifts to family, she said that they didn’t want anything. She tried to interest her nieces in “sentimental family stuff” but did not get far. She had three old-fashioned photo albums that contained pictures of her grandparents, and she wondered if perhaps the county museum back home would want these artifacts. “These pictures should go back to where [my grandparents] were born, married, and raised kids.”

2.4. Familial possessions

Disbandment reveals how the ownership of some things, regardless of who ends up with them, is shared. Because such possessions symbolize the kinship line, their exclusion from the family is hard to conceive and special responsibility is owed them (Price et al., 2000; Stum, 1999). Decision making for such things is more deliberate.

Interviewer: What kinds of thing do you think were harder to deal with than others?

Respondent: Oh maybe just different family items and things maybe that had some family connection. Wondering if someone else would want it. But looking through some of those things, you think about it. But, truthfully, significant items like furniture someone took.

Interviewer: So what kinds of things were given to family or friends?

Respondent: Oh, there were things like different collectibles that they had, dishes. Just family items. Maybe things that belonged to my sister and I when we were growing up that had been up in the attic. (Mr. I)

The value of these objects resides in their ability to embody or memorialize forebears, as Ms. A explained:

And really, the piece of furniture that will always be in our family is, like, this china cabinet. My dad brought these dishes from Maine on a plane and I don't know what you call them, but there is a name for them. They were his mother's. So my grandmother on my dad's side collected those dishes.... And this buffet was my grandmother's on my mom's side. When I got this house, I knew that wall was made for the buffet. So I got these two pieces of furniture. My one sister got granny's desk, an old roll-top desk. So it took a while to decide who was going to get what and divide things as evenly as they could.

Family things can hold the presence of recent decedents, as well. The "main thing" for Ms. H. was a harp that her mother had "started playing when she was really young... It's just beautiful. It's gorgeous." Mr. G described how the adult children had objected to their mother's disposal of their late father's things (see Morris, 1992 for a similar anecdote). The mother had started donating her husband's clothing during his final illness.

So she started before he died. Then, after, she really began sorting through stuff and disposing of it. And of course it was hard on the family because my mom was trying to be very practical about it, and I think my siblings and I were acting very strongly like it was getting rid of dad. We know rationally it was a very important step but it affected us all emotionally.

Photographs were a category of objects that was rarely downsized. Research shows that elders consistently list photos among their most cherished possessions (Kamptner, 1989; Redfoot & Back, 1988; Rubinstein, 1987; Wapner, Demick, & Redondo 1990). In almost every case here, family members said that the collection of family photos remained intact through the move, held by either the elder or family, preserving the images of the family if not their exact identities.

Interviewer: Photos?

Respondent: We have them. They are in a giant trunk in Ohio. I think when we actually took the thing home, we went through the storage and there were like ten boxes of photos. Like, everybody. I don't know—my parents don't know half of the people. And she [grandmother] didn't know everybody. But we've got really old photos lying around.

Interviewer: So you still kept all those?

Respondent: Right. (Ms. B)

Ms. J, because her father "has a really bad memory," asked for the family photographs. "I feel I'm most responsible for them, the keeper of that sort of thing. He gave them to me on loan and I have never given them back."

2.5. The family story

The dimensions of disbandment that we have reported so far refer to the behaviors and emotions of individuals: what they did, how they did it, and how they felt. But disbandment can also affect the family as a collective, reinforcing or creating understandings that contribute to the ongoing social construction of the group (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Stone, 1988). We suspect that disbandment episodes pass into family lore and become part of its story. For example, the events can lead family members to refresh their typifications of one another. Our informants recalled how the process confirmed familiar dynamics or put siblings' traits once again on view. They reported disagreements and sometimes too much advice from within the family ("boatloads of advice" and "too many chefs"). Siblings characterized other siblings as not good at following through, not well organized, too analytical, too ready to claim who had done the most. Enduring patterns seemed to lie behind Ms. A's observation:

I think we all had a lot of tolerance for each other when it came down to it. And I learned after 38 years to just bite my tongue, and I'm a very outspoken person. I just don't sugar-coat stuff, and I say it like it is. But really it's just a lot of trying to have tolerance for each other and do what was best for mom and dad. Not what was best for us or me. So that the whole transition goes smoothly for them.

Some family members found that the disbandment had created solidarity among them. Mr. D said that the move had been "a collaborative effort" among mother, brother and sister, and their spouses. "We had several days as a family to get together and go through the items with her." Mr. I called the experience "an opportunity" for himself, his sister, and parents. "It was good family experience for us to go through things and recollect things, the memories. That was fun, too. Not always do (my parents) have the chance to do it."

Attendance upon disbandment made an impression on even the third generation of one family and created new expectations about the future. Mr. G told us that his daughter, having observed two moves by her grandmother, had now turned a critical eye on her own parents' things.

My daughter, who is a college student, said, "I want you guys to clear everything out now. I don't want to go through this when you're old. ... It's going to be my problem next and, watching everything that you two have gone through, I want you to start cleaning up." And she really has been putting some pressure on us. "Why don't you clean this stuff up? Why don't you clean a lot of this out now? Not wait till the last minute." It's very interesting.

3. Discussion

As a life event, the household disbandment of elders is nonnormative and time-limited, lasting only a few weeks or months. Yet because of the life course pattern of linked lives (Elder, 1998), these short, occasional episodes are likewise life events for family members who are drawn into the activities of possession management. The significance of disbandment ripples out in time, as well, because its tasks have been anticipated long before they commence and because elders and family will live with the practical and emotional consequences of their behavior after the move is complete.

Disbandment is not a single family behavior or experience, but rather a field or venue for all sorts of family practices (Gubrium, 1988). In this way it is like other such fields—holiday gatherings, ceremonies, hospital vigils—that are occasions for the business of being family. Having described the various ways that family members "attend" disbandment, we can summarize this accompaniment along three continua that characterize (a) the receiving of goods, (b) the location of agency, and (c) family's view of itself.

First, family absorbs some of the possessions that elders do not retain. On one hand and depending on the objects at issue, this might be an unsentimental, practical matter of convenience, "taking" things that the elder is shedding and then settling the fate of those objects at a later time. On the other hand, family can be a repository for the conservation of meaningful objects. The things that come their way are accepted as gifts or claimed from the elder's stock because they are special, valued for their ability to perpetuate the identity of the elder or the memory of the kinship line. The success of this family "keeping" depends on exchanges that are fair and emotionally satisfying (Marx et al., 2004; Stum, 1999).

A second continuum locates agency for the numerous tasks of divestiture—all the things that are to be decided, arranged and done as the elder downsizes. At one end, elders have complete agency in the disbandment, as in those cases in our project where family had no sustained involvement. In the middle of the continuum are cases where family members supply assistance

but cede autonomy to the elder. This pattern exemplifies the collective selection, optimization, and compensation outlined by Baltes and Carstensen (1999) or the collaborative decision making described by Hummert and Morgan (2001). At the far end is family paternalism in the disbandment, executing the activities of dispossession to protect and secure the elder's eventual well-being. With no irony, this paternalistic intervention is the sort that seems undertaken in order to enhance the elder's autonomy (Moody, 1992).

A third dimension characterizes the extent to which this time-limited life event registers in the family's story or understanding of itself. According to Gubrium and Holstein (1990), family members develop a sense of themselves as a collective that thinks, feels, and acts in certain ways, a "virtual project of experience" (p. 58). This third continuum intersects the other two in regard to goods-receiving and agency. Physical and emotional disengagement from the disbandment proceedings will contribute little to the family project. But family willingness to help does affirm mutual ties and establish who helps whom, who is central and who is marginal. Deeper involvement becomes an occasion to later recall the way "we" cooperated, or how "we" got it done, or how "we" squabbled in our usual way. The elder's offer of cherished possessions might signal who is regarded as "in" a family and who is not. The reception of cherished possessions further constitutes family by reminding the participants that the collective has boundaries outside of which some belongings must not fall. Their retention within the family also signals that it endures and remembers. Certainly individuals can remember "what happened" during the disbandment, but family can also use it as a resource for telling "who we are."

This study hardly exhausts the topic of family attendance upon household disbandment. An analysis that would match and compare the elder's report with that of the family informant deserves a separate analysis. The initial cases described here help to outline certain features of the family role, but further research could capture a greater variety of experience—across a larger sample, across time as disbandments progress (we only studied people who had already moved), and across multiple family informants. This would be the opportunity to study a number of interesting questions, such as who mobilizes family members to attend in the way that they do. Another question is whether the exchange of cherished possessions is wholly the elder's initiative (passing things on) or the family members' chance to take control of shared possessions, or even something specific to certain kinds of objects (Marx et al., 2004). Filial emotions at the loss of a "home place" should be plumbed. As much as the space being disassembled had supported the everyday life and emotions of the elder (Rowles, Oswald, & Hunter, 2003), it may have been laden with meaning for adult children as well. Finally, household disbandments undertaken by kin when an elder is deceased or disabled could yield further insight about family keeping and making (Finch & Hayes, 1994; Stum, 2000). Not only does family participate in the household disbandment of elders, this process also has ways of constructing family.

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Table 1

Characteristics of respondents and movers

Respondent				
Relationship to the mover	Pseudonym here	Elder(s) who moved	Old residence and tenure there	New residence
Daughter	A	Female, age 82, widowed 9 months (since moving)	3-bedroom house, 25 years	2-bedroom apartment
Granddaughter	B	Female, age 85, widowed 22 years	3-bedroom mobile home, 14 years	Studio apartment
Daughter	C	Couple, ages 86 and 87	2-bedroom house, 17 years	2-bedroom duplex
Son	D	Female, age 82, widowed 2 years	3 1/2-bedroom house, 29 years	1-bedroom apartment
Daughter	E	Female, age 84, widowed 5 years	1-bedroom apartment but larger, 4 years	1-bedroom apartment
Daughter	F	Female, age 84, widowed 2 years	3-bedroom house, 10 years	1 bedroom apartment
Son	G	Female, age 77, widowed 1 1/2 years	2-bedroom duplex, 3 years	1-bedroom apartment
Daughter	H	Male, age 81, widowed 10 years	4-bedroom house, 15 years	1-bedroom apartment
Son	I	Couple, ages 73 and 73	3-bedroom house, 33 years	3-bedroom apartment
Daughter	J	Male, age 74, widowed 12 years	3-bedroom house, 27 years	1-bedroom apartment
Daughter		Female, age 60, widowed 15 years	2-bedroom mobile home, 2 years	Studio apartment
Son-in-law		Female, age 86, widowed one year	House, 5 years	1-bedroom apartment
Brother		Female, age 87, single	3-bedroom house, 12 years	1-bedroom apartment
Daughter		Couple, ages 71 and 74	Large house, 5 years	2-bedroom apartment