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## Distributing Possessions: Personal Property Can Become a Social Matter:

**Eventually, most elders begin to deal with their possessions in a surprising variety of ways—with motivations from self-satisfaction to the wish to transcend mortality**

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Over the course of their adult lives, people accumulate possessions. They buy them, find them, make them, and receive them as gifts. Adults assemble a material convoy around themselves as they enact social roles (householder, spouse, parent, employee) or embark on projects to develop, express, or enjoy themselves (Smith and Ekerdt, 2011). They also shed things along the way, in routine ways. Goods flow in and out during daily life, but many things stick. And because the convenience of storage tends to exceed the inconvenience of disposal, people find themselves in the second half of life with “stuff.”

Living quarters, grounds, and even vehicles contain uncounted things whose meaning and significance are a jumbled lot. Some things are special, but most are mundane, some even mysterious. People keep possessions for two basic reasons: things are either useful or symbolize something (Ekerdt, 2009). These meanings can grace the same object and shift over time. An automobile is something to drive and show off one’s practicality or style; once new, it depreciates over time, but after a long enough time it can resurrect as a classic car.

The charge is often leveled that ours is a throwaway society, but research has concluded otherwise (Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe, 2007). Most people are reluctant to discard serviceable possessions, preferring instead to give them away, sell them, or even leave them at the curb for the public to pick up. Although there is a great (and unproven) conviction that the current generation of older people, having come through economic depression and war, are frugal, waste nothing, and keep everything, other cohorts also share the virtues of recycling, reuse, and thrift.

Even if they have heeded the critique of the anti-clutter industry and kept their households manageable, people will arrive in later life curating an accumulation of possessions that must eventually be dealt with—by someone. Sooner or later, what is essentially personal property becomes a social matter.

## Distributions Mark a Turning Point

It is quite possible to do nothing about household contents, leaving the disbandment to one's survivors. But there usually comes a time—or, rather, times—when most elders begin to deal with their possessions, in part by passing things along to other people. These divestments are a signal, an implicit announcement to oneself and to others that a turning point is at hand. The disassembly of one's material convoy, to the extent that it happens, is an enactment of the gathering awareness that life's time is growing shorter (Carstensen, 2006). Distributions of possessions are acknowledgements that things will not continue as they are, that one is oriented toward limits.

The prompts for these distributions are several. They are a necessary part of moving to a new residence, which in itself is the outcome of a decision that daily life will be lived on a different footing. Such moves are almost always to smaller spaces, and the divestments that occur under these circumstances have been the focus of our research in the Midwest with a team from the University of Kansas and Wayne State University (Ekerdt et al., 2004; Ekerdt and Sergeant, 2006; Luborsky, Lysack, and van Nuil, 2011).

Our interviews about relocation in more than 100 households have also touched on other prompts to downsize. These include life events such as the death of a spouse or bouts of illness. Lessons are learned by observing the way people manage possessions, taking the successful methods of family or friends as a model and their failures as a caution. The maturation of grandchildren, grandnieces, and grandnephews inspires gifts that this generation is now ready to use or appreciate. Finally, none of these events may have happened—moves, losses—but some elders begin to trim possessions in the anticipation of whatever is to come.

Rather than heralding diminishment, we think that possession distribution is a forward-facing gesture that confronts the uncertainty of later life and asserts control over the accumulation of a lifetime. To sort through one's things is necessarily to visit the past, but it is likewise an engagement with the future.

Even though the property and belongings at issue are personal, the onset of distributions is cooperative and probably long anticipated. It is a principle of the life-course perspective that lives are linked and lived interdependently (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2004). Family members may have hastened divestments with suggestions that something needs to be done about “the stuff,” or they may have feared this stage as a portent of their elders' mortality.

It is good to remember that adult children are quite familiar with a lot of parents' possessions, having grown up among them. They may survey possessions with an eye for preferred items, or warily hope that the burden of other items will pass them by. They know what's “in there.” Elders, for their part, may for years have been keeping mental or actual lists of what will go where, going so far as to mark the underside of items with the names of intended recipients. It only remains to begin.



Distributions are episodic, for the effort is not made all at once. Givers may improvise formal presentation ceremonies for certain items. Family members and acquaintances can be called in on other occasions to select things from circumscribed lots (e.g., jewelry, houseplants, Christmas ornaments). Word may get around in the family that the elder is in divestment mode and ready to accept advice about dispositions.

Once a downsizer is in gear, any available recipient may find him or herself gifted with something. As one woman told us: “My friends—the people I know, sometimes people come for dinner. One of their daughters just loved a painting I had and I just took it off the wall and handed it to her. It gave me a lot of pleasure.”

### Lightening the Load

At a minimum, distributions move things away from elders, lightening the household. Beyond this, distributions serve any number of purposes that in each moment depend on the circumstances of the elder, the identity of the receiver, and the meaning of the object(s). The objectives and motives for distributions overlap with features of gift exchanges, a topic that has been well-visited in anthropology, economics, and other disciplines (Carrier, 2006; Otnes and Beltrami, 1996). Gifts between people are the main way to distribute possessions, but sales and donations are other ways to complete the transfer.

For the person who is divesting, the primary motive may be self-satisfaction. People feel relieved when they have safely seen certain possessions into new hands, given them good homes. This responsibility weighed so heavily on one of our householders that she resorted to magical thinking:

I found myself wishing that I would have a fire [laughs] and it would just disappear. I know that sounds silly. The decision making was so hard that I just couldn't...I didn't have a way to deal with that. I thought if I just had a fire and it all disappeared then I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. But that didn't happen.

Some observers claim that elders bestow certain possessions to achieve a death-transcending transmission of themselves into the minds and affections of their survivors. Cherished possessions can be deployed in order to transcend mortality, placing them with legatees in order to reproduce, ancestralize, memorialize, and donate the self (Hunter and Rowles, 2005; Marcoux, 2001; Marx, Solomon, and Miller, 2004).

Alternatively, the primary motive of the giver may be wholly the satisfaction and sentiment of the recipient. Such selfless transfers look to delight, thank, or prove helpful to the new

owner. Donations have this altruistic quality because the ultimate receivers are unknown (buyers at a thrift shop, museum patrons) and will never reciprocate the gift.

Besides the satisfaction of giver and receiver, other potential outcomes flow from distributions. Social ties can be affirmed, made, or tested (“Do you love me?”). Gift exchanges often create bonds, but can also create future obligations. Distributions can also express or uphold the social order, speaking to gender roles or to precedence among recipients, forestalling conflict, or depositing anecdotes into family lore that contribute, for good or ill, to the group’s ongoing understanding of itself and its story (Ekerdt and Sergeant, 2006).

While distribution episodes begin with pre- conceived intentions and expectations among all parties, things may not play out as anticipated. Possession distribution is not the kind of ritual that is tightly scripted; when divesting, there is frequent resort to Plan B.

### What About the Special Things?

The special, dear, and valued things in the material convoy get a lot of attention in the popular media and in consumer research. Of course people can transfer ownership by legal means, but many cherished possessions do not rise to the level of titled property (Stum, 2000).

The category of treasured things is likely to include tokens of personal identity or biographical importance, things with great monetary value, collections, or “inalienable” things that have passed down through the family or group and whose separation from the group is unthinkable. An antique is just an old object, but an heirloom has a genealogy. In passing special things to new hands, the items might already be well known, or they might need storytelling to secure their significance.

Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000) have provided a thorough analysis of the disposition of special possessions. In interviews with older people, they were impressed by the way that elders’ increasing awareness of mortality motivated them to settle the future of cherished possessions, seeing to the objects’ long-term protection and appreciation and perhaps to the legacy of self or family. There was an intent in such transfers to send a “meaning bundle” along with the object.

Price and colleagues point out that the tactics for these dispositions proceed from interwoven decisions about who, when, and how. Who is the best recipient? Some things must stay in the family, but there still may be multiple logical recipients. Perhaps the best choice for any cherished possessions is whoever asks first, or can house it best, or would value it most, or is most deserving.

Potential recipients are also ruled out by such criteria. The “when” of transfers can be spur-of-the-moment, or saved for meetings of the family, or be prompted by ritual occasions such as weddings and graduations when one would give a gift anyway. But the timing of distributions gains urgency from the realization that there is limited time within which to control events. The “how” of transfers is usually a direct handoff, but sales can also be used to identify the most congruent recipient.

Basing decisions on gender is one tactic that older adults use to resolve the “who” question. If no ideal claimant appears, possessions are passed down according to gender role expectations and traditions. We commonly heard about sons taking over their father’s collections, military paraphernalia, and other personal items. One grandmother we spoke with talked of trying—with no success—to give away fur coats to her granddaughters and

great-granddaughters, eventually turning to the other women in her family to facilitate these dispositions. Gender is not necessarily the primary tactic, and certainly not the only way to decide to whom possessions are offered, but in many cases following gender conventions gives older adults a heuristic for divestment.

We have also noticed a type of gift that is half-given, half-retained in an exchange akin to “archiving.” The giver places things (e.g., a beer can collection, an antique cash register, a curio cabinet) with designated people, with the understanding that the treasures will be visited in the future and could be reclaimed.

Decision making about (and transfer of ) special possessions is laborious and so it isn’t feasible to pass a large number of objects in this way (Ekerdt, Luborsky, and Lysack, in press). We are wary of advice to elders that celebrates the “perfect gift” for “just the right person” because this optimization of transfers may well inhibit them. Finding “good homes” for too many things will only slow down what may be a necessary process of divestment.

## Offers and Claims

Along with efforts to match specific objects with recipients, more possessions are likely to be distributed by the methods of offering and claiming. People simply volunteer sets of possessions to others who volunteer to take them. This is such a well-followed cultural practice that nearly every downsizing household that we studied used this strategy.

The procedure is simple, as recalled by this widow: “Called the kids over, the five of them, and said, ‘Take what you want. Here’s what I’m taking [when I move]: my front room, my kitchen, my bedroom. Whatever else, you take!’” Offers are sometimes the whole house, sometimes they are limited to certain categories of things. The advantages are that a lot of possessions can be transferred this way, and multiple claimants for the same thing sort out any equity issues among themselves.

Claiming is the counterpoint behavior on the part of recipients. During a distribution episode that they may well have seen coming, family and friends are free to ask for things that are presumably available. These exchanges are not “storied” as special dispositions are. Rather, people describe how quantities of things were taken, spoken for, or how they wound up with someone.

At the same time, stories emerge from these low-initiative giveaways. This occurs when people make unexpected—or surprising—claims on objects. In retrospect, such claims make it possible for the owner to conclude that some possession has ended up with just the right person. A surprising claim can elevate possessions from ordinary to special. One woman had “boxes and boxes and boxes of slides” from travels with her husband. She was reluctantly going to discard them, when a grandson-in-law took the whole lot, and the slide carousel, too (“He was delighted!”). Another woman said: “Things that I never would have thought my children wanted were what they wanted.”

## Stories and Sales

Sales, as a generic divestment tactic, occur downstream from gifts, offers, and just-right donations to charities. However, when a cherished possession is at issue, sales can be used to identify an appropriate recipient when no one among family or friends seems a fitting beneficiary. The goal is to find a buyer with congruent values, either as to the qualities of the item or its monetary worth (Lastovica and Fernandez, 2005). Collections, for example, are difficult to pass on with their meanings and members intact. If a suitable heir is not apparent, a collection might be better off sold.

Sales involve divestment rituals all their own (Hermann, 1997; McCracken, 1988; Roster, 2001). As opposed to gifts, where one wants meaning to adhere to the object, things for sale are cleaned or refurbished to erase associations with the seller and ease passage to a new owner. Pricing strategies are another ritual. Sellers assess buyers, then may lower the price to entice a certain buyer or set the price high to disqualify owners who will not be sufficiently appreciative. A third ritual behavior between buyer and seller is storytelling, one side telling the object's history and the other relaying plans for its future. Stories might also be deployed to kindle a new owner's appreciation. A woman in our study literally introduced her things to their buyers in order to influence how they would "end up":

I would talk to the people after they bought [things]. I would give them a little background story about where it came from, who had it. And it's like getting a puppy...I probably could've donated it [the thing] someplace, but I didn't know how it would end up, and at least I could go watch it at auction and talk to the people who bought it and things like that.

### Gracious Acts of Receiving

Elders' initiatives to distribute possessions can be confounded in a number of ways. The meaning of a cherished possession may be so idiosyncratic that its value to others is limited (Tobin, 1996). There may literally be no heirs for family things. Some gifts are stillborn because the life-course timing or situations of intended recipients are not aligned for the occasion. For example, at least three households in our study had planned to give a piano to selected children, none of whom, as it turned out, were interested or could presently accommodate such an item.

Gift indifference by the next generation may be a matter of their having fully furnished households, or may be their disinclination to curate someone else's collection of belongings. Family members can resist not just objects, but acts of distribution altogether, refusing to engage in conversation about who gets what as a way of denying the elder's mortality: "Oh Mom, you're not going to die tomorrow" (Stum, 2000).

The ritual of possession distribution is not complete without acts of reception. It is the taking in that "becomes an act of generosity" (Marcoux, 2001). Those who accept things are truly donors themselves, because in taking a thing, they affirm what the elder is doing and what the gesture means. Possession distributions are inherently connective acts at a turning point in life. What is our advice to friends and family? Just take it—and take some more.

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