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# A study of object use : adults, special objects, and contemporary American culture

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Emily Walsh  
A Study of Object Use:  
Adults, Special Objects, and  
Contemporary American  
Culture

### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an inquiry into the meaning and functions that special objects hold for American adults. After interviewing 29 adults—10 who identify as male and 19 who identify as female—about their special objects, I found that these objects are felt to have profound meaning and important functions for adults. Objects are found special for possessing superlative physical characteristics—visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, energetic, or due to their size, weight, or sturdiness. And they are found special for their functions: as signifiers of affiliation or membership in a group; as things that assert and reify personal identity; as things that connect possessors' to special people, places, and/or times; as things that connect them to something larger such as the Divine, “infinite consciousness,” or to a new perspective on humanity; as things that stimulate thought; as things that bring comfort and calm; as things that bring protection and/or luck, good energy and/or emotional health. My study indicates that possession of and interaction with an object is connected to feeling a positive emotion—feeling calm, comforted, loved, proud, connected, affiliated, fascinated, or “full in [one’s] heart.” There are some negative feelings associated with special objects as well, such as obligation, burden, guilt, anxiety, and shame. These special objects are distinct from consumer objects; most are old, worn, and felt to be irreplaceable. I found that some objects in this study seem to be transitional objects, and some seem to function in similar ways to transitional objects, though there is no clear indication that possession of these objects indicates pathology.

My findings suggest that special objects are a typical—and meaningful—part of American adult life.

**A STUDY OF OBJECT USE:  
ADULTS, SPECIAL OBJECTS, AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
CULTURE**

A project based upon independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Master of Social Work

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2014

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

When I was twenty-five, I moved to Hanoi, Vietnam, where I spent a year teaching at a school in the evenings and wandering around on my motorbike, taking photographs, during the day. I then traveled through Southeast Asia and India and spent several months in Morocco, where my then-partner had a research fellowship. I am privileged to have been able to do this.

I loved the color of the buildings in Hanoi—mustard yellow, and a pink like the inside of a conch shell. I loved the way that people hung pots and pans out on their shutters, and hangers of clothing along the telephone wires to dry. I loved the tangle of electrical wires along buildings, snarled because so many people had tapped into the lines, and I loved how so much activity happened in the streets: lunch and dinner on tiny chairs, haircuts with mirrors tacked up to trees, naps on the back of motorbikes, teenage make-out sessions, and in the early mornings, old folks kicking an object similar to a badminton birdie back and forth. I loved watching women of all ages gather for aerobics in the parks, bobbing amongst the bushes. And I loved being in a state of wonder and curiosity and excitement.

I found myself gathering objects: bits of interesting rubbish, a mahjong piece, seedpods, paper mache objects burned in funerals, bark that could be used as a toothbrush. I took dozens of pictures of haystacks in the Vietnam countryside, because the form of the haystacks was incredibly beautiful and I wanted to hold onto the experience of seeing them. I made a map of the labyrinth of alleys behind my home. I hoped that someday these things would be able to



transport me back to my time in Vietnam, that they could channel the texture and feel of my experience, stimulate my thoughts, inspire my art, and take me back to that state of fascination and aesthetic bliss that I felt when I was there. It pained me, somewhat, to not be able to bottle the smells I encountered, just as it disappointed me when a perfect photograph got away from me and all I had was the memory of an image (I still feel regret that I was too shy to take a picture of three brightly-clad women in the Indian Himalayas who were knitting on a mountainside while they tended their cattle); yet, with the objects, I could hold onto some of the experience.

As I traveled, I also began asking people about the things that they carried with them, particularly the things that had no apparent practical purpose. The sentimental things, some might say, though I find that term unnecessarily disparaging, and prefer not to use it. I felt there was something inadequate, for example, about the term sentimental in reference to the things I gathered, because they felt more vital than that. And when people chose, as they told me they did, to carry charms, and photos, and small pebbles, and notes from friends across the Himalayas, for example, it was apparent that the objects had some palpable significance: one literally carried them on one's back.

I came back to the United States when my grandmother died. I brought sand from the coast of Morocco, because she had been interested in the soil from different places, and I poured it over her casket. I acquired special things from her, small things that remind me of her: a tiny pelican figurine, and the hand towels she used in her kitchen.

I began interviewing artists about their work. I would often ask about the objects that they kept close, what was tacked to the wall above one's desk, or clustered on one's studio workspace. Painter Timothy Wilson's response shines light on the way objects stimulate and inspire artists:

I went to a few antique shops last week and picked up an amazing children's pillow, with French maritime tick and fraying seams. Four dollars. It's amazing! I have a Maritime Bank check tacked in my studio that I picked up at the same location as well. From the 19th century. The whale stamp in the middle is what did it. Having those historic images just helps to inform my senses, whether or not I directly use them in my work. I have a book of old saw woodcuts, a large format book of Velasquez, and a book of Alchemy right in front of me right now. Oh, and a little still life on my window sill of some old hunting knives and a broken seashell and an old copper cow bell. They look really nice together when the sun hits, and feel simultaneously like an adventure story, a Wyeth still life, and a seaside flotsam pile. I can just look at them and be happy for hours.

Printmaker Bryan Nash Gill also talked about the way objects inform and stimulate his art:

I find a lot of my materials by accident. The sense of discovery is exciting that way and gives the objects bigger meaning. I am always looking. There is the occasional dumpster dive and always walks in the woods which are full of fascinating stuff. I also have friends bring me stuff, ...wasp nests, bones, found wood, old tools... The last thing I found was a Cercopia moth that had dropped out of the sky in our back yard. One of the largest and most beautiful moths I have ever seen...I generally like objects that have inherent beauty; the form, the color, texture. Sometimes, these objects are tossed or placed on a shelf and may stay there for years until they find a place within one of my works.

Objects are integral to many artists' creative process. For my own art, I have gathered many objects, and also keep a trove of images on my computer under the file "good to think with," a

reference to Claude Levi-Strauss' (1966) idea that the concrete can stimulate creative and intellectual thought.

I continue to ask friends and acquaintances about their special objects, and am always impressed by the richness of peoples' answers and the significance and meaning they find in their objects. I also follow the stories of disaster survivors who clutch onto treasured objects.

With all this in mind, it was somewhat of a shock for me to discover that many of the psychoanalytic theories on adult's attachment to objects regard it as sign of ill mental health or weak ego strength. Objects have been considered in other disciplines, though, and recently academics have started to shake the notion that a study of objects is, as Sherry Turkle (2007) writes, a study of materialism, perversion, or hobbyism. Material culture became a discipline in the 1990s.

The purpose of this study is to answer the following question: "What are the meanings and functions of special objects in the lives of American adults?" The operational definition of *special object* is an object that holds significant meaning to the person who possesses it. *American*, in this study, refers to people who currently hold American citizenship.

The major reason for conducting this study is that the results have the potential to transform the way we understand special objects, leading to a less pathologizing stance on object attachment and use in adulthood. Social workers are called upon to challenge injustice; if a portion of the population is understood in a way that is potentially based more on bias than on fact, it is important to investigate further.

The second reason for undertaking this study is that there appears to be a dearth of literature on the topic. Though anecdotal evidence supports the notion that special objects play significant roles in adulthood, most studies of special objects have dealt with infants and young

children (Erkohlanti and Nystro'm, 2009, p. 400). One reason for this lack of literature seems to be a *fait accompli* in that influential thinker Donald Winnicott's assertion that adults should not, in health, attach to objects, seems to have been taken as final (Kahne 1967).

I conducted the study by interviewing a sample of 29 individuals who are American citizens, are either 18 years of age or older, and possess a special object. I asked questions about their special object, determining why they find it meaningful and how they interact with it. To obtain my participants, I used snowball sampling through social media and word of mouth. I used interview guide to collect data.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

*Because we are all born small and dependent, grow and mature relatively slowly, and eventually die, and because we exist in three dimensions and possess five senses, we share a relation to the material world ... one crucial shared attribute resulting from this form of embodiedness is a need for objects; human beings need things to individuate, differentiate, and identify; human beings need things to express and communicate the unsaid and the unsayable; human beings need things to situate themselves in space and time, as extensions of the body (and to compensate for the body's limits), as well as for sensory pleasure; human beings need objects to effectively remember and forget; and we need objects to cope with absence, with loss, and with death.*

-Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," 2005

*Ordinary objects which have long been used by one master take on a sort of personality, their own face, I could almost say a soul, and the folklore of all nations is full of these beings more human than humans, because they owe their existence to people and, awakened by their contact, take on their own life and autonomous activities, a sort of latent and fantastic willfulness.*

-Paul Claudel, Meditation on a Pair of Shoes, 1965

*There are no ideas but in things.*

-William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, 1947

### Introduction

This study is an inquiry into the objects currently identified as special to American adults. I am particularly interested in the meaning that such adults ascribe to their chosen objects, the places they put their objects, the ways they interact with their objects, and the reasons that they find the objects special.

My operational definition of *special object* is an object that holds significant meaning to the person who possesses it. My operational definition of *transitional object* is an object that

holds intense meaning for the individual that possesses it, that is understood to be in some way created or selected by the owner as a means to fill in for one's caregiver, that acts as a source of comfort, and that helps one transition from a state of dependence to a state of independence, from a state of fantasy to a state of reality acceptance. I may or may not find that the objects in question warrant the term "transitional object," depending on the role that they play in their possessors' lives and the relationship that their possessors have with them.

Until recently, scholars—and the general public—have not tended to think of objects as particularly significant within adult life. As Sherry Turkle writes:

Behind the reticence to examine objects as centerpieces of emotional life [until the 1980s] was perhaps the sense that one was studying materialism, disparaged as excess, or collecting, disparaged as hobbyism, or fetishism, disparaged as perversion. Behind the reticence to examine objects as centerpieces of thought was the value placed, at least within the Western tradition, on formal, propositional ways of knowing. In thinking about science, certainly, abstract reasoning was traditionally recognized as a standard, canonical style; many have taken it to be synonymous with knowledge altogether. (2007, p. 6)

Though I cannot speak to the broader academic understandings, I can say that adult object use has not been seriously examined within the psychological sphere since the late 1970s, and it seems that the same notions—that object use is merely materialism, or merely hobby, or merely sexual fetish—hold within this field as well. In addition, we contend with the notion that object attachment is a sign of pathology; Donald Winnicott, who wrote prolifically on the use of special—or, as he termed them, *transitional*—objects in childhood, considered the possession of intensely special objects in adulthood a sign of either sexual fetish or pathology (1971).

Though some—notably Merton Kahne (1967), Simon Grolnick and Alfonz Lengyel (1971), and Ralph Greenson (1978), have sought to understand adults’ attachment to objects further, observing variation in object attachment and making space for a type of object attachment that is distinct from pathology, this investigation seems to have been put on hold, and contemporary research and clinical writing has largely avoided the topic. As Ritva Erkohlahti and Marjaana Nyström (2009) state, despite the “anecdotal evidence in support of the view that certain articles continue to play the role of a [special object] after childhood...most studies of [special objects]...have naturally dealt with infants and young children” (p. 400). We are left in a curious position: As Kahne (1969) observed nearly half a century ago, there has been a “theoretical *fait accompli*” leading to the premature assumption that object attachment is pathological, and that we already know how adult attachment to objects functions, yet we do not know these things (p. 249).

For the purpose of this study, I find Sherry Turkle’s (2007) study on evocative object use among artists and scholars to be particularly illuminating, as well as Cipriani et. al.’s (2009) exploration of the use of “reminiscentia” among the elderly, and a recent study by Richard Wiseman and Caroline Watt (2004) which shows that positive superstitions such as the use of a lucky charm is correlated with life satisfaction. These studies suggest that there is more to examine regarding the use of objects among American adults, and propose that object use can have broader—and healthier—functions than previously thought.

This study aims to broaden our understanding of the existence and function of special objects in the lives of American adults. In it, I undertake to catalogue the multiplicity of meanings and functions of objects in the lives of contemporary American adults, by conducting lengthy and detailed conversations with 29 participants about their special objects. I ask

questions about participants' associations with their objects, where they got them, why they are special, how they interact with them, and more. My expectation is that many of the responses will resonate with the reader, and sound familiar, perhaps stimulating greater acceptance of and support for the use of special objects. At the same time, I expect that some meanings and functions will be surprising, perhaps even to those that I interview. Ultimately, my findings support the notion that special objects can have intense meaning for adults, can be intimately connected to one's thoughts and feelings, and can function in a healthy way.

This study is important within the field of social work, for two major reasons. First, there is a dearth of literature on the subject, and this study will contribute to our understanding of the way humans make meaning and experience life. This is of automatic relevance to a field focused on understanding and positively impacting the human experience. Secondly, the results of this study have the potential to lead us to a less pathologizing stance on object attachment and use in adulthood. Social workers are called upon to work toward just understandings and treatment of humans; when a pathologizing stance has been arrived at, it is important to vigilantly examine the validity of this stance.

### **Talismans and Transitional Objects**

The literature on object attachment tends to center on early childhood. M. Wulff was the first to compile case material on children's attachment to inanimate objects (1946), though he acknowledged that outside of clinical writings such material was familiar and abundant. "Instances [of object attachment]," he wrote, "...are not particularly infrequent and are familiar to nearly everyone from his practice or his daily life" (p. 456). Wulff explored the connection between childhood attachment to objects and the manifestation of fetish in adults. His work



inspired D.W. Winnicott to consider more closely the phenomenon of children attaching themselves to objects (Tabin, 2005, p. 69).

Winnicott published his original formulation on object attachment in 1951 in the article “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” and expanded his theory in later writings, notably *Playing and Reality* (1971). His ideas continue to resonate strongly today, inspiring numerous academic papers and studies, including this one. Like Wulff, Winnicott (1971) started with a description of the types of objects that acquire a specialness—indeed, a “vital importance,” to the child. His description is somewhat vague, intended as a general picture rather than a rigid definition, in order to “leave room for wide variations;” in the study of a single infant, he wrote:

There may emerge something or some phenomenon perhaps a bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown, or a word or tune, or a mannerism—that becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety... Perhaps some soft object or other type of object has been found and used by the infant, and this then becomes what I am calling the transitional object. The parents get to know its value and carry it round when traveling. The mother lets it get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in continuity in the infant’s experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and the value of the object to the infant. (p. 5-6)

Not all children develop this type of attachment, but as Winnicott noted, the phenomenon is familiar to “anyone in touch with parents and children” (1971, p. 8).

In order to understand Winnicott’s perspective on object attachment, it is essential to understand his thoughts on infant development. In earlier psychoanalytic writings, he noted,

thinkers grouped experience into two major areas and charted development as a movement from the first area toward the second (1971). Winnicott referred to these areas as illusion and disillusion/reality acceptance though he also referred to them as inner reality and external reality (p. 18-19), pleasure principle and reality principle (p. 13), a “state of being merged with the mother” and a state of “being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate” (p. 19-20), “primary creativity” and “objective perception” (p. 15), or dependence and independence (p. 20). The developmental task, he emphasized, is never completed; “no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality” (p. 18). But the general trend of development is from illusion toward reality-acceptance (p. 3).

In Winnicott’s (1971) understanding, a child can only progress from illusion to disillusion if she has a “good-enough mother” (p. 13), a primary caretaker attuned and attentive enough to the child that he/she can anticipate and adapt to a child’s needs. By adapting to the child’s needs, the good-enough mother creates in the child a sense of pleasurable illusion: an “illusion of self-completeness [and]... magical omnipotence,” as Usuelli Kluzer has summarized it (2001, p. 49), and an illusion that “there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant’s own capacity to create” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 13). For example, when the child is hungry, it conjures “the idea of something that would meet the growing need that arises out of instinctual tension. The infant cannot be said to know at first what is to be created. At this point in time the mother presents herself” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 16). The child feels a need, and then the primary caretaker’s responsiveness to that need gives the illusion that the child wished his need-fulfillment into being, that he has the power to conjure things into being (Winnicott 1971, p. 16).

As the infant grows, the “inevitable imperfections in maternal care—delays, inadequacies or distractions—are for the child progressive ‘disappointments’ which contribute to the child’s

experience of separateness and gradual awareness of his own limits and contours” (Usuelli Kluzer 2001, p. 49). One major example of a maternal frustration is weaning (Winnicott 1971, p. 17), which conveys to the child his lack of omnipotence and self-completeness and the reality of external disappointment. The good-enough mother makes possible the child’s initial illusion as well as his later disillusionment (Winnicott 1971, p.15-17).

Separating himself from previous theorists, Winnicott posited the existence of a third, intermediate, area of existence. In *development*, Winnicott wrote, this intermediate area provides a transition between illusion and disillusion. Babies’ first special possessions, which Winnicott terms transitional objects, are closely connected to this intermediate area, for they manifest within this intermediate time.

This idea is strikingly original. Anna Freud, writing contemporaneously, considered children’s special objects to be very much a part of the first area of experience. In fact, she understood object attachment as a way to maintain within a state of illusion; through use of the object, she stated, the child denies certain aspects of the external world so as to “not become aware of some painful impression from without” (1966, p. 89). Thus, her young male patient finds comfort in wearing—or clutching—his father’s hat when feeling anxious, which happened, for this child, when he encountered a “tall or powerful man” (1966, p. 88). Freud suggests that the object lessens the child’s anxiety by helping the child to deny the existence of external stressors—in this case, the fact of others’ superior strength and power. In Freud’s framework, children outgrow the need for objects when they develop mature ego functions/defenses—i.e. when they enter into the second area of experience, reality-acceptance.

To Winnicott, the transitional objects function quite differently; they are chosen—or in a sense, “created”—by infants *as they begin to recognize and accept reality* (1971, p. 3). He

emphasized that the objects are not internal (they have an objective presence) though they are not wholly external either (they are related to a child's internal reality, creativity, and illusion) (1971, p. 3). This is why they are transitional: They are not wholly illusory nor wholly a part of external reality.

The transitional object has several important functions. First, it “start[s] each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged” (p. 17). This neutral area is connected to creativity, play, and cultural experience, and is important throughout one's life. At first this area of experience is linked to the specific object, but in adulthood, Winnicott argued, it manifests as “the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work” (1971, p. 19). Clearly this is of importance to the project at hand, and we shall discuss it further in the pages to come.

Second, the transitional object helps the child to move toward full reality-acceptance. In a sense the object stands in for the caregiver, supplying protection, safety, and comfort when the caregiver is not available. When a child is overwhelmed—“at bedtime or at time of loneliness or when a depressed mood threatens”—the transitional object is often “absolutely necessary” to “defend against anxiety” (p. 6) and ease the child's disquiet. By providing a safe step away from the state of dependence and illusion, the transitional objects provide a means through which the child can, eventually, transition toward a state of independence from the caregiver and acceptance of reality.

So what exactly are transitional objects, in the clinical sense? That is, how do we, as clinicians and researchers, identify them? There is such wide variation in the things that classify as transitional objects, for they are as idiosyncratic as each individual child who “creates” them.

Necessarily, though somewhat confusingly, transitional objects are often recognized by their *function*. They are objects that function as part of the intermediate area of experience, as a half way between internal and external reality.

To get at a more precise understanding, Winnicott identifies several specific qualities to the relationship between person and object that distinguish transitional object attachment from other kinds of object relationships. He summarizes the special qualities of the relationship between an *infant* and his/her transitional object as follows:

1. The infant assumes rights over the object, and we agree to this assumption. Nevertheless, some abrogation of omnipotence is a feature from the start.
2. The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated.
3. It must never change, unless changed by the infant.
4. It must survive instinctual loving, and also hating and, if it be a feature, pure aggression.
5. Yet it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.
6. It comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not a hallucination.
7. Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be deattached, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. (1971, p. 7)

Thus, we can classify an object as *transitional* based on the quality of relationship its possessor has with it, and by the function it plays in that person's life. Transitional objects are defined both by how they function, from an outside perspective, and how they are felt to function, from an inside.

Winnicott opened up a rich—and very compelling—new way of understanding the liminal experience in which individuals play and create and make meaning, connecting their inner experience with external (shared) reality. The intermediate area of experience—which in childhood is associated with transitional objects and the task of reality acceptance—maintains importance throughout one’s life as a source of intense experiencing and rich meaning.

What, then, is to be said about adult attachment to objects? Winnicott felt that each transitional object will, by its very nature, become gradually decathected—that is, lose its meaning, in a process wherein the sense of comfort and vitality it once contained becomes diffused throughout the child’s world (p. 7, p. 19). Meaning and warmth and intense experience no longer come from just one object, but from art making and art viewing, for example, and/or religion, dreams, theft and lying, other people, drugs, rituals, and other such things (1971, p. 7). When a child fails to decathect from the transitional object, Winnicott asserted, then the object either becomes fetishized and “persist[s] as a characteristic of adult sexual life” (1971, p. 7), or it continues to be seen as an objectively necessary magical object, in which case “we discern or diagnose madness” (1971, p. 10).

So then, are we to understand that object attachment is never a feature of healthy adult life? Winnicott suggests so; healthy adults, he indicates, *don’t* maintain attachment to objects (1971, p. 7). Instead, they enjoy other types of “personal intermediate area” (1971, p. 19): for “in *health*” he wrote, “there is a gradual extension of range of interest, and eventually the extended range is maintained, even when depressive anxiety is near” (1971, p. 6) (italics mine). In Winnicott’s mind, the healthy adult moves from focus on a single object toward engagement in art, religion, creative scientific work, or similar experiences.

Object attachment does not typically persist into adulthood, Winnicott wrote, but the intermediate area of experience most certainly does. This area is an area of experience that is *felt* to be true, if not objectively provable. Adults form bonds with others when their inner psychic reality, is shared; as psychiatrist Merton Kahne summarizes (1967), adults maintain “healthy illusions which, when shared with others, give meaning and continuity to life.”

In health, adults are aware that others may not understand or share the beliefs that emerge from their inner psychic reality. Thus, a healthy adult is careful not to make “claims” about the objective reality of their beliefs until they are certain that others have a “degree of overlapping” in their own “corresponding intermediate areas,” such as when members of a group share similar understandings of art, religion, or philosophy (p. 19). The “hallmark of madness,” he wrote, is “when adults put too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a sharing of illusion that is not their own” (1971, p. 4).

This leads me to an important critique. As Winnicott stated, adults are disinclined to share the beliefs and feelings that arise out of their intermediate experiences with others if there is no sense of overlapping belief. So, using that logic, what healthy adult would share his/her feelings of object attachment with someone who, like Winnicott, has already determined that object attachment is somehow an indicator of perversion, pathology, or deviant behavior? If respected clinicians such as Winnicott have expressed, very vocally, that object attachment in adulthood is a sign of madness or sexual fetish, then a healthy adult who continues to possess special objects would quickly determine that these clinicians do not have any degree of overlap with this particular aspect of their intermediate area. Such a healthy adult would, then, be very likely to avoid making claims about the meaning of objects in their lives: *when around clinicians*. It is certainly possible that Winnicott didn’t believe adults have object attachment

because he didn't come across this phenomenon, while he simultaneously didn't come across the phenomenon because he expressly didn't believe in it.

External reality is, as Winnicott emphasized, a shared reality (1971, p. 19). When one is in a state of reality-acceptance, the reality that one is accepting is a socially agreed-upon idea of reality. And, of course, clinicians, psychodynamic theorists, and researchers are all participants in as well as observers of this reality. One of the paradoxes that arise out of this situation is that “health” is at once a clinical concept and a social construct, just as psychodynamic practitioners are both clinicians and social beings.

Winnicott's fluid use of the term “we,” illustrates this issue. “Should an adult make claims on us for our acceptance of the objectivity of his subjective phenomena,” he wrote, “we discern or diagnose madness” (1971, p. 18). The “we” in this sentence is ambiguous, referring simultaneously to clinicians and the general public. Anna Freud's writings on object attachment are similarly interlaced with social constructions of normalcy; she too makes frequent reference to the way object attachment behaviors are commonly—that is, socially—understood. She states, for example, “We do not as a rule see anything abnormal in the small boy who wants to be a big man and plays at being ‘Daddy,’ having borrowed his father's hat and stick for the purpose” (1937, p. 88). In another passage, she comments on how a particular child's rituals with his hat led to his being “regarded as an odd child,” but that later in life he chose to attach himself to a less conspicuous object—the pencil—and was theretofore “regarded as normal” (p. 91). Again, it is apparent that the “we” in Freud's statements includes the general populace as well as simply clinical theorists. When reading anything regarding health and pathology, one needs to bear in mind that clinical observation and research findings draw upon—and contribute to—social constructs.



All of that said, is the reality that object attachment in adulthood is necessarily pathological a *shared* reality? Not entirely. Anna Freud (1966) emphasized that, from her perspective, certain kinds of adult object attachment are *not* a sign of weakened psychic functioning and diminished emotional health. She too felt that object attachment in adulthood is often a sign of ill health—to her way of thinking, an indication of regression to primitive defenses, a weakening of ego strengths such as reality testing, and a transition from a neurotic position to a position of “psychotic delusion” (p. 90); adult attachment to objects generally indicates that one’s “relation to reality has been gravely disturbed and the function of reality testing is suspended” (p. 90). However, while Freud is firm about asserting that object attachment in adulthood *generally* indicates a weakening of one’s ego strength, she makes room for an exception: neurotic adults’ attachment to objects (1966). Though she is vague about the distinctions between this type of object attachment and more psychotic object attachment—distinctions both of form and function—Freud takes pains to make space for a type of adult attachment to objects that is not pathological.

Sigmund Freud himself, were he to weigh in on the matter, would likely have held the perspective that object attachment in adulthood is often perfectly normal. He himself lined his mantelpiece and desk with objects: ancient sculptures of humans and animals. “Every morning,” art reporter Cathy Curtis informs us, “he habitually reached over and patted one of his animal ‘friends’” (1990). When Freud fled Vienna during the Nazi takeover, he:

Paid a special ‘ransom’ for the sculptures to be shipped to his new home in London.

There they resumed their familiar positions on his desk, a large and motley audience facing him attentively. (Curtis, 1990)

These figurines were, it seems, of hard material, a far cry from a cuddly piece of eiderdown. But they are still objects, and they still clearly had a specialness to Freud. Anna Freud referred to objects that people hold dear as *talismans* (1966, p. 90). How is a talisman different than a transitional object? *Is it different?* As Merton Kahne wrote:

Are we to make the same assumptions if an adult still clenches a bit of a bed sheet between her teeth on going to sleep as we do when we think about a woman who buys another pair of shoes when she is lonely? Are we to think in the same way about a young psychiatrist who buys a wool jacket to console himself after being rejected for analytic training? Or a dentist who wears his father's sweater after the latter's death? Does the clenching of the bedsheet by itself imply anything about the adequacy of adult ego organization? Is the object *always* representative of the tie to the mother or her breasts?...Is the existence of the phenomena to be regarded, when manifest in adult life, as expressive of defective differentiation by the ego of partial or whole objects? Or is it conceivable that even in situations where there were no initial disturbances in the original maturational sequence, such phenomena may occur under the impact of regression?

(1967, p. 249)

These questions have yet to be fully explored, and it is the purpose of this study to shine light on the relevance of exploring them.

### **Empirical Studies**

To date, there has been only limited research into the meaning and function of special objects in adulthood; most research on object use has focused on infants and young children. Here I review five studies on object use in adolescence and adulthood—two that take a traditional (Winnicottian) perspective that adult object use is likely connected to pathology; one

that suggests that teenagers—traditionally considered too old for transitional objects—can, in fact, effectively use such objects to continue a negotiation toward secure independence from their parents; two more that consider the function of objects in the lives of the elderly; and lastly, a study on the role of lucky charms. In examining this range of studies, we can become familiar with a traditional reading of Winnicott, in which object attachment in adulthood indicates pathology, while also considering the ways that this traditional reading might be broadened by extending (or perhaps even suspending) the age limit for healthy use of transitional objects, and also by considering alternative ways that object attachment might serve adults. These studies, all of which suggest that object use can manifest in adulthood, raise the question: are people ever fully done with the need for objects that function as *transitional* objects? And if so, what other roles does their object attachment play?

Two studies reviewed below come from the perspective that the presence of a transitional object in adolescence and adulthood is a likely sign of pathology—correlated to depressive symptoms in one study and borderline personality disorder in another. The theoretical bent of these studies emerges out of Donald Winnicott’s initial concept of transitional object (1971), which indicated that by adolescence a healthy individual should have decathected from their object.

Rivta Erkolahti and Marjaana Nyström (2009) undertook a questionnaire-based study on the link between depressive symptoms and transitional object use in adolescents. Their study found that sadness was more common among adolescents who used transitional objects than among those who didn’t, but that anhedonia and low self-confidence appeared in similar amounts in those who possessed transitional objects and those who didn’t. I find this study limited in that it does little to illuminate the particular meaning and functions of these objects in the lives of the

teens that possess them. The researchers clearly rely on Winnicott's original definition of transitional object (1971), and thus presume that transitional objects have only one function: to help the teens individuate from their parents. When the function is already assumed, researchers would logically not be concerned with the teenagers' individual perceptions of the role and meaning of their objects. Relatedly, the researchers did not disclose their questions on transitional objects; in assessing this study, it is important to understand how they defined and communicated what constituted a transitional object to the teens in their study. Were richly meaningful objects left out of the discussion due to a narrow definition of transitional objects? Without knowing the precise language used in discussing objects with teens, we can only speculate.

Interestingly, Erkolahti and Nyström's findings indicate that transitional object use is 22% higher among adolescents than reported in a previous study. They suggest that this might be due to the younger age of their population. My speculation is that social attitudes on the possession of special objects in later adolescence might impact older teenagers willingness to report or even discuss their special objects. I also think, again, that the way researchers communicated what they were looking for to teens would have an enormous impact on the answers that they received from their participants. What social pressures and what conceptualizations impacted the teenagers' reports?

Hooley and Wilson Murphy (2012) studied the connection between adult use of transitional objects (they used this specific term) and borderline personality disorder. They use a range of tests—one on the intensity of attachment to transitional objects, one on the history of childhood trauma, one on experiences in close relationships, and one on participants' relationship/bonding with primary caregivers in childhood. And they hypothesized that among

the non-hospitalized population, individuals who possess transitional objects are more likely to have borderline personality disorder than individuals who do not possess such objects.

Hooley and Wilson Murphy ascertained that there *is* a relationship between the intensity of attachment to a transitional object and the incidence of borderline personality disorder. My concern with this study is that, instead of relying on (or looking for confirmation from) outside clinical practitioners, researchers themselves diagnosed participants with borderline personality disorder over the course of the study. Because of this, the findings may be affected by confirmation bias. Additionally, as in the previous study, the researchers do not articulate the way that they defined transitional objects for study participants; the way that this concept was defined and presented to participants would, again, have a large impact on the answers that participants gave (for example, in their initial indication that they possessed or did not possess such a thing).

Because the specific definition of transitional object in each of these studies is not articulated, it is difficult to assess the validity of the studies' findings. It is clear, however, that whatever the merit of their findings, these studies do not articulate the function and meaning of objects as understood by those who possess them. There is a gap in the literature in terms of understanding the precise function that objects play in the lives of adolescents and adults.

In the next study that I examine, Rivka Ribak addresses this gap in the literature by asking Israeli teenagers directly about the ways that they used and understood a specific object—the cell phone (2009). Because she asked about a specific object, Ribak sidestepped the issue of how to ask about transitional objects in a non-leading way, that is, in a way that appreciates and makes space for the diversity of objects that might qualify as transitional objects. It also makes room for the possibility that specific objects might serve multiple functions.

The cell phone might not strike one immediately as a good candidate for a transitional object, but Ribak (2009) finds that it actually seems to function as one—if not literally, then certainly metaphorically. Ribak interviewed teenagers over the course of four years, discussing their interactions with and understandings of both their cell phones and their parents. She found that the phones were understood (and used) as a fill-in for the parent—a tool for safe parental oversight and protection (in terms of parental checking in), a source of comfort—keeping the teenagers company, and as a step toward increased independence—allowing the teenagers freer range of movement and communication. They function, again, as transitional objects, a means through which the teenager can both carry the parents with her—sustaining interdependence—as well as a means through which she can negotiate greater independence. Ribak’s (2009) study and findings open the way for an idea of transitional objects that is more inclusive than traditionally conceived; she suggests that the concept could apply to things that are effectively—and healthily—used into late adolescence, as well as to things besides the teddy bears and blankets of toddlers.

Two other studies that I examine are focused on object use among the elderly. Joseph Cipriani, Megan Kreider, Kim Sapulak, Michelle Jacobson, Meghan Skrypski, and Kimberly Sprau (2009) interviewed nursing home residents in Pennsylvania (30 male and 40 female) about the objects that they had chosen to bring with them into their nursing home rooms, and Sherman (1991) surveyed and interviewed 100 adults (aged 60–102 years) about the kinds of memorabilia and cherished objects they identified.

Cipriani et. al. (2009) broke down the types of objects into nine general categories: decorative items, pictures, electronics, religious objects, stuffed animals/dolls, items one can wear, plants/flowers, linens, and leisure objects. They found that all but one participant identified

at least one item that held significant value and importance to them. Sherman's goal was to determine how objects were related to reminiscence and current mood as measured by the Affect-Balance Scale, and found a relationship between memorabilia and mood; interestingly, lack of a cherished object was associated with significantly lower mood scores. This study suggests that objects use can play important roles in promoting health, and makes it important to reconsider how object attachment works among younger adults.

The final study that I examine is titled "Measuring Superstitious Belief: Why Lucky Charms Matter." Richard Wiseman and Caroline Watt, the authors of this study, note that most research into superstitious belief has found associations between such belief and "poor psychological adjustment," low self-efficacy and "high trait anxiety" (2004, p. 291). Yet, they note, the test questions in these studies refer only to negative superstitions (such as the thought that "breaking a mirror will cause bad luck") and omit any inclusion of positive superstitions (such as the idea that "carrying a lucky charm will bring good luck") (2004, p. 291). Wiseman and Watt set out to see if "the psychological correlates of superstitious belief vary depending on whether the belief is in positive or negative superstitions" (2004, p. 291). Their results indicate that there is significant interaction between superstition type and life satisfaction. Possessing a lucky charm, it seems, is correlated with life satisfaction.

One type of object that some adults find meaningful is the lucky charm. Not everyone has one, but some do. For the purposes of this study, it is highly interesting to note that possession of such an object, far from being an indicator of poor psychological health, is actually an indicator of healthy psychological adjustment and satisfaction with one's life. This goes far toward suggesting that attachment to an object, as an adult, does not necessarily indicate pathology.

Cipriani et. al.'s study suggests that the possession of meaningful objects is quite common among older adults (2009). And Sherman's suggests that these objects function both as memorabilia—which I understand as souvenirs of past events/experiences, and potentially as mood enhancers (the finding was that mood and object possession are correlated, though causality has not yet been determined) (1991). And Wiseman and Watt's (2004) study indicates that adult attachment to lucky objects is correlated with psychological health. The studies illuminate that possession of objects in old age is common. And they hint at the functions that special objects might play, but ultimately leave room for a more thorough investigation of the meaning and role of objects in the lives of older adults.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

Despite the dearth of clinical writing and empirical research, instances of adult object attachment are common, familiar to nearly everyone from his/her daily life: photos carried in wallets or set on desks, small pebbles arranged on a windowsill, keepsakes from a special vacation, gifts from a close friend, heirloom jewelry, lucky charms. As historian Auslander (2005) points out, we exist in three dimensions and possess five senses; we do not cease to be embodied as we grow into adulthood. Why, then, should we grow out of the need for objects?

In the psychoanalytic world, Merton Kahne was perhaps the first Winnicott follower to take up the issue of transitional phenomena and objects persisting in adult life. Though Winnicott had written off adult object use as pathology or fetish, Kahne felt that there was more to understand about such attachment. He was interested, for example, in whether such attachment is the same as infant attachment to transitional objects or wholly distinct:

It is, for example, very likely that the routine, perfunctory removal of personal possessions such as rings, driver's licenses, wristwatches, and other tokens of identity...



which occurs upon admission to many mental hospitals, achieves its quality of ego-debasement through its successful, abrupt challenge to the patient's illusions and actual autonomy as symbolized in these items. The reaction of adult patients...is reminiscent of the infant's distress when his prize possession is removed or misplaced. Transitory fetishistic phenomena are also very much in evidence among college students in their first years of separation from home. (1969, p. 257)

He felt that there were similarities, but likely differences between infants and adults with regard to objects. What are the nuances of adult object relationships, and how exactly do they function?

Kahne (1967) pointed out: "most writers do not differentiate between the persistence of the original transitional object and subsequent derivatives and displacements" (p. 249). That is, he found that writers tend to casually refer to adult object relationships to be the same as infants' relationships with transitional objects, and he argued that this confuses the issue, suggesting that a conclusive theory exists when, in fact, it has not been articulated.

Nobody, Kahne argued (1967), is seriously problematizing the theory when it comes to adult object attachment; "the very success of the concept [of transitional object] seems to have resulted in a theoretical *fait accompli*," he stated, leading to "premature assumptions" that the phenomenon of object attachment in adulthood is "pathognomonic of...particular disorder[s]" (p. 249). There is more meaning, he argued (1967), to be teased out: "[O]nly via careful clinical documentation of the phenomena as they occur in varying types of patients can we arrive at a considered opinion as to the appropriate place of data whose implication promises to be so crucial to our theories" (p. 250).

Kahne himself (1967) supplied clinical material from his work with three adult patients, observing that object attachment appeared in moments of stress, during which patients "would

retreat to magic to maintain the illusion of control” (p. 256). The thought is, it seems, that stressful situations make people feel overwhelmed and out of control, and objects provide a sense of security, safety, and control. Importantly, he also observes that “it would seem that existence of derivatives of [transitional objects and phenomena] in adult life is not per se any index of seriousness of social handicap or pathognomonic of any particular neuroses or psychosis,” though, he felt, it may signal “disturbances” in object relations and one’s sense of reality (p. 256).

These are tentative observations, gleaned from only three patients, but they shine light on the fact that any theoretical *fait accompli* regarding adult object attachment is premature; there are still questions to be answered, for direct observation contradicts and raises questions about extant theory. What, we might ask, qualifies as a derivative of a transitional object? How are these derivatives different from (or similar to) the original transitional objects? Do they arise in the absence of childhood transitional objects? What can object use in adulthood tell us about stress and coping in adulthood? How is stress related to transitional experience in adulthood? The questions abound.

Grolnick and Lengyel (1978) wrote to argue that Etruscan (and other) burial objects perform the same role as transitional objects. This is, of course, interesting because one of the ways transitional objects are identified is by their function. Like Kahne, Grolnick and Lengyel observe that adults reach for transitional objects during times of stress:

At the adult level, when there is an insufficiently developed internal soother (Tolpin, 1971), a general regression due to illness, or fear of the reality of death, the individual and the culture reach for the solace of familiar objects. These can be functionally,

symbolically, and often iconographically reminiscent of the transitional or fetishistic objects of early childhood. (p. 381)

Transitional objects—actual transitional objects and the derivatives of childhood transitional objects—they argue, continue to manifest and perform important psychological functions throughout the life cycle.

How do Grolnick and Lengyel (1978) square their observations and assertions with Winnicott's theory? They return to the idea of areas of experience—as Winnicott put it, illusion, disillusion, and an intermediate area—and then argue forcefully that these areas of experience are fluid, that individuals go back and forth between each area:

It is our view that developmental and maturational systems do not 'fix' in an Eleatic sense, that the Heraclitean flow back and forth across the primary-process-secondary-process, concrete-abstract, perception-fantasy, and self-object interfaces not only allows for, but actually defines, the presence of the transitional experience throughout development, i.e. *until death itself*. (p. 401)

This is important. Winnicott himself, we remember, emphasized that reality-acceptance is never fully reached; humans continually strain to fit together internal and external reality (1971, p. 18). What other way, then, should we conceptualize experience than as a continual back and forth between illusion and disillusion, through an intermediate, liminal area?

Ralph Greenson (1978) wrote about neurotics' attachment to objects, observing that, as Anna Freud suggested, there seem to be differences between psychotic and neurotic object attachment. While neurotic patients feel their objects to be, "to a degree, alive," he observed, they also "know this to be an illusion" (p. 206); psychotic patients' reactions to inanimate objects are, however, "delusional."

Interestingly, Greenson (1978) also noted a difference in the qualities neurotic and psychotic patients ascribe to/feel from their special objects. In psychotic patients, he observed, “inanimate transference objects are usually malignant and terrifying (Klein 1952, Rosenfield, 1952),” whereas, “in neurotics, transitional objects may be hated besides being loved, but they must endure and they may not retaliate” (p. 206). This is interesting. Consider how this observation meshes with Wiseman and Watt’s (2004) study on lucky charms; how interesting would it be if research showed that neurotic objects tend to be understood as lucky charms, and are correlated with psychological health? And of course there are other important questions: What, for example, are we to make of psychotic object relationships in which the object is not malignant and terrifying?

Greenson (1978) also observed that the analyst herself can function as a transitional object. Others, too, have asserted that individuals can function as transitional objects (see Miller, 1986). Is a person-as-transitional-object different from an object-as-transitional-object, and if so, how? Is a person-as-transitional-object different from a person-as-internalized-object? It seems abundantly clear at this point, but I will emphasize it once again: More focused attention is needed on adults’ attachment to objects.

Finally, Greenson (1978) suggested that neurotic adults’ special objects may be appropriately thought of as “talismans”: “a magical means of averting bad luck or evil” (p. 207). Again we note the use of the word talisman, the same word that Anna and Sigmund Freud used in regard to neurotics’ special objects. Should we consider adults’ special objects to be transitional objects, then, or derivatives of transitional objects, or talismans, or something else altogether? While several psychoanalytic papers *have* been published that refer to adults’ use of transitional objects (see Elmhirst 1980, Farrell, 2001, Goetzmann, 2004, and several of the

empirical studies above), these papers are inadequate at answering the questions surrounding adult object use.

### **Theoretical Approaches within Other Fields**

Objects have been considered within other disciplines, notably anthropology (Appadurai, 1988; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Mauss, 1954), sociology (Baudrillard, 1975), political ecology (Bennett, 2009), literary theory (Barthes, 1991), art theory (Attfield, 2000), and craft theory (Kohn, 2013). The concept of transitional object appears in writings from many disciplines in reference to teenage and adult object use (Attfield, 2000; Auslander, 2005; Harrington and Bielby, 2013; Highmore 2000, Ribak, 2009; Schneiderman, L. 1999). Many also explore adult object using with separate terms and concepts (Bennett, 2010; Fariello, 2004; Korn, 2013; Ramljak, 2004). Though I have neither the expertise nor the space to discuss all the extant theories on objects, I would like to touch on two books that I find particularly useful in understanding how today's academics think about the function and meaning of objects: *Biographical Objects*, by Janet Hoskins (1998) and *Evocative Objects*, by Sherry Turkle (2007).

Hoskins, a professor of anthropology at the University of Southern California, focuses her ethnography *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (1998) on notions of self and personhood among the Kodi, who live on the western tip of the Eastern Indonesian island of Sumba. But, as with any successful ethnography, her material engages questions pertinent to the study and understanding of humans in general. Hoskins found that "ordinary objects" can "be given extraordinary significance by becoming entangled in the events of a person's life and used as a vehicle for a sense of selfhood" (p. 2). She notes that anthropologists have started to recognize self as "constructed through narrative, in a process of enactment and rhetorical reassertion," which "makes it possible to examine individual identities

not as unified essences but as “a mobile site of contradiction and disunity, a node where various discourses temporarily intersect in particular ways” (1998, p. 6). Following the writings of French sociologist Violette Morin, Hoskins distinguishes between “biographical objects”—objects whose use is “centered on the person”—and public commodities:

Though both sorts of objects may be produced for mass consumption, the relation that a person establishes with a biographical object gives it an identity that is localized, particular, and individual, while those established with an object generated by an outside protocol (what we might call a public commodity) are globalized, generalized, and mechanically reproduced.... At the temporal level, the biographical object grows old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner, while the public commodity is eternally youthful and not used up but replaced. At the spatial level, the biographical object limits the concrete space of its owner and sinks its roots deeply into the soil. It anchors the owner to a particular time and place. The public commodity, on the other hand, is everywhere and nowhere, marking not a personal experience but a purchasing opportunity.... Finally, the biographical object imposes itself as the witness of the functional unity of its user, his or her everyday experience made into a thing. The public commodity, on the other hand, is not formative of its owner’s or user’s identity, which is both singular and universal at the same time. Consumers of public commodities are decentered and fragmented by their acquisition of things, and do not use them as part of a narrative process of self-definition. (p. 8)

Biographical objects, she notes, can acquire a “psychic energy” due to the emotional significance that is invested in them (1998, p. 20). They are, she emphasizes, more significant than public commodities “because of the ways they are remembered, hoarded, or used as objects of fantasy

and desire. They are used to reify characteristics of personhood that must then be narratively organized into an identity.” (p. 8)

Hoskins states rather explicitly that in modern industrial societies such as America, biographical objects are rare (1998), and that she believes that this connects to the fact that people in these societies tend to have “negotiated, unstable, and fragmented” senses of self (p. 191).

In her book *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle, a professor of the social studies of science and technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a clinical psychologist, pulls from a vast number of literary and theoretical texts—including Bruno Latour, Claude Levi-Strauss, Arjun Appadurai, Jean Baudrillard, M.M. Bakhtin, Sigmund Freud, Roland Barthes, Karl Marx, William James, Victor Turner, Susan Sontag, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Marcel Proust, Jacques Derrida, Eric Erikson, and Michel Foucault—in her effort to create an “object discipline” (2007, p. 10). Turkle (2007) notes that despite this multitude of writings on material objects, “the acknowledgement of the power of objects has not come easy” (p. 6). Academics have still tended to shy away from fully embracing the concrete as a valid area of inquiry; even psychologist Jean Piaget and anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who “each in their way contributed to a fundamental revaluation of the concrete in the mid-twentieth century, also undermined the concrete thinking they promoted” (p. 6).

And yet, she notes, beginning in the 1980s, thinking through the use of concrete objects been “increasingly recognized in contexts that were not easily dismissed as inferior” (p. 7). As a particularly telling example, she notes that scientific ideas are now understood to emerge out of an engagement with physical materials: “Nobel laureates testified that they related to their scientific materials in a tactile and playful manner” (2007, p. 7). Interestingly, in the field that

perhaps contributed most to the valuation of abstract reasoning over other ways of knowing, scientists have now begun to discuss the ways that their ideas and knowing often emerge from engagement with the material world. Leora Auslander has written, “Even highly literate people in logocentric societies continue to use objects for a crucial part of their emotional, sensual, representational, and communicative expression” (2005, p. 1017); Turkle would add that we also use them to think with. By collecting narratives and writings on objects, Turkle forwards objects as a centerpiece, and “contributes a detailed examination of particular objects with rich connections to daily life as well as intellectual practice” (2007, p. 7).

Turkle uses the term “evocative object” to indicate objects held as special. This means thinking of objects “as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations of thought,” (p. 8) as “thought companions, as life companions” (p. 9), and as “active life presences” (p. 9). Using this term, Turkle deliberately shifts the emphasis toward viewing objects as vital to our emotions and thoughts, rather than as merely, “useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences” (p. 8). As Turkle sees it, “Most objects exert their holding power—[that is, are meaningful]—because of the particular moment and circumstance in which they come into the author’s life” (p. 8). Others are meaningful for more intrinsic qualities: they seem “intrinsically evocative,” either because they have an uncanny quality (understood, using Freud, as things that are “‘known of old yet unfamiliar’... distorted enough to be creepy.”), because they “remind us of the blurry childhood line between self and other” like childhood transitional objects (p. 8), or because they are “associated with times of transition,” for “transitional times (called “\’liminal,’ or threshold, periods by the anthropologist Victor Turner) are rich with creative possibilities” (p. 8).

In terms of function, Turkle sees evocative objects as things that “provoke thought” (2007, p.8) participate in our “emotional life” (p. 8), “bring philosophy down to earth” (p. 8),



“are able to catalyze self-creation” (p. 9), and are a “source of inner vitality” (p. 309).

Making an argument for a more central role for objects in the study of history, Leora Auslander asserts that “objects... have effects in the world,” for:

Without the crown, orb, and scepter, for example, a monarch is not a monarch. And not only do certain words uttered in marriage ceremony transform two individuals into a couple, but in many traditions the rings exchanged are equally necessary.... Finally, to offer one last example, in twentieth-century Europe, the style of a person’s clothing or home inevitably and inexorably located that person in society; the objects did not reflect as much as create social position (as well, some would argue, as the self itself). (2005, p. 1017-1018)

Auslander asserts that humans need objects because they carry “affective weight”:

Because we are all born small and dependent, grow and mature relatively slowly, and eventually die, and because we exist in three dimensions and possess five senses, we share a relation to the material world.... One crucial shared attribute resulting from this embodiedness is a need for objects; humans need things to individuate, differentiate, and identify; human beings need things to express and communicate the unsaid and the unsayable; human beings need things to situate themselves in space and time, as extensions of the body (and to compensate for the body’s limits), as well as for sensory pleasure; human beings need objects to effectively remember and forget; and we need objects to cope with absence, with loss, and with death. (2005, p. 1019)

Auslander asserts adults often shift their object attachment from transitional objects to “something worn by the parent” (p. 1019). The objects become “crucial objectifications of

intimate relations” (p. 1020) that act as “memory cues” (p. 1020), and allow people to cope with the loss of the relation/relationship:

Adult psyches facing permanent loss by death often lodge the mourned person in his or her left-behind clothing....[P]sychoanalysts Serge Tisseron and Yolande Tisseron-Papetti... argue that... “because the emotions tied to the lost person are no longer held in the psyche but deposited in certain parts of the surrounding world and melded with those objects, they do a great deal more than to fix a memory. They reunite, inextricably combined, the lost person and the part of the self that had been in contact with her”....

Things are not just things. (p. 1021)

Interaction with particular objects becomes a way to access memories of people and experiences, to connect to the past, and to understand one’s identity within the present” (p. 1021). This thought is echoed by Christopher Bollas, who identifies a “subset of evocative objects” that he terms “generational objects,” or “those phenomena that we use to form a sense of generational identity (1992: 255) and explore links between self-in present, self-in past, and the collective experiences of our generation” (Harrington and Bielby, 2013, p. 90-91).

## **Conclusion**

Though Donald Winnicott seems to have written off adult object use as pathology, later theorists have worked to expand our understanding of object use. Anna Freud (1966) and, later, Ralph Greenson (1978) noted that there seems to be a difference between how neurotic and psychotic adults attach to and use objects. Grolnick and Lengyel (1978) observed that adults continue to move back and forth among illusion, transitional space, and disillusion, and tend to reach for objects in times of stress. Sherry Turkle (2007) has written that objects provoke thought, participate in our emotional lives, and catalyze self-creation, and Hoskins (1998) has

considered how objects can acquire “psychic energy” and assert and reify aspects of the self that can be assembled into a narrative concept of self. And recent research projects are also opening up our understanding of the function of objects, suggesting that they are performing more central roles than previously thought: possibly even affecting us for the better. In this study, I seek to broaden our understanding of the different ways that objects function within and give meaning to the lives of American adults.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This study is a qualitative investigation into the prevalence, range of type, and span of objects currently identified as meaningful to adults living in America. Through interviews, I obtained information about objects and object specialness from participants. This approach was useful because the open-ended interview questions allowed for idiosyncratic responses with potentially significant variation. The goal of the project is to understand the unique ways that special objects are understood and function within the lives of individual adults, and the interview approach is best for obtaining complex, rich, intimate information in this area.

My hypothesis was that adults can stay cathected to objects in a ways that are not indicative of pathology or fetish. I expected that there would be significant variety in the objects that participants felt attached to, as well as patterns of object encounter and object meaning.

### **Sample**

The focus of this study is on adults (people age 18 and up), who currently reside in the United States. This population is, of course, enormous. It is also heterogeneous, comprised of people who identify with a range of cultures, religions, socioeconomic positions, genders, sexual orientations, physical abilities, countries of origin, and spiritual practices. My actual study population was constrained by limitations such as time (the amount of total time that could be dedicated to interviewing) and access (who I could make aware of the study and get to participate). For the purposes of this study, an ideal representative of this sample could have had any combination of identifiers, as long as they were 18 years of age or older.

I used snowball sampling and availability sampling to gather subjects for my project. I relied on word-of-mouth and social networking strategies to gather 30 participants. I aimed to include a diverse population, but did not turn people away if they did not represent an under-represented segment of the population. The subjects were self-selected, and as a whole do not mirror the demographics of the general American population.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

To protect the confidentiality of study participants I will not label interview notes or cassette tapes with real names, but with pseudonyms instead. In addition, I will lock informed consent forms, interview notes, and cassette tapes in a file drawer during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. After such time, I will either destroy the above-mentioned material or maintain it in its secure location. Finally, I will not use demographic data to describe each individual; rather, I will combine demographic data to describe the subject pool in the aggregate. In this way, study participants will not be identifiable in the final report.

Participants were assured that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. All participants signed informed consent forms. A copy of the form is attached in Appendix B. Where names were included in my findings, these names were changed to protect confidentiality.

Benefits for participants include the following opportunities: articulating their personal experiences, gaining insight into the manner in which objects represent sources of meaning and/or comfort, and directly contributing to a neglected area of research. Risks for participants are minimal, but include the possibility that some of the interview questions could trigger negative thoughts and feelings. For this reason, participants remain anonymous except for the fact that I will know who the participants are.

## Data Collection Methods

Individuals who met all selection criteria and agreed to participate in the study were mailed a consent form that further describes the nature of the study, the risks and benefits of participation, and the federal regulations that will be met to protect their confidentiality. Once individuals signed and returned their consent forms to me, I telephoned them to schedule interviews.

I used semi-structured interviews, in person and over Skype, approximately a half-hour in length. Considering the dearth of literature on this subject, an interview format is appropriate; interviews allow us to understand where future qualitative research should head.

All participants were asked demographic questions. Those who affirmed that they possessed an object of special significance were asked a series of open-ended questions about their object(s). All participants were asked the same general questions, though some interviews required follow-up questions for clarification; these follow-up questions were specific to particular interviews. Individuals were free to elaborate upon their particular experiences to the extent that they chose, which allowed them to articulate their own particular experiences with their significant object(s).

My questions can be broken down into the following themes:

- Object description (i.e. what is the object?)
- Origin (i.e. where/from whom did you get it?)
- Significance (i.e. what makes it special?)
- Connotation (i.e. does it remind you of a particular person/place/thing/event?  
AND what kind of person has an object like this?)

- Function (does this object have a practical function? Do you interact with the object... use it, clean it, look at it, talk to it?)
- Enduring significance (would you bequeath it to someone?)
- Reliance upon the object (what would it be like to lose it?)
- Current life status of the participant (are you in a transition?)

Please see Appendix A for a full list of my interview questions.

Interviews were recorded with ITALK and TAPEACALL, two recording applications created for the IPHONE, and then transcribed into Microsoft Word documents.

I was concerned about factors that could prevent participants who possessed significant objects from indicating within interviews that they did. My first concern was that participants might misunderstand the type of object that questions were aimed at eliciting information about, and might disqualify objects and decline to mention them. My second concern was that individuals might be too embarrassed to talk about—or even name—their object(s). Because object-attachment in adulthood is currently considered an indicator of pathology or fetish, there is some stigma around possessing objects that may make adults reluctant to acknowledge their own relationship with significant objects. And while there are some objects, such as photos of one's children, that are not taboo to hold dear, there may be other objects that are less socially sanctioned and thus less easy to discuss, such as objects typically associated with children; discussing taboo or stigmatized object possession may lead one to feel shame, and this may discourage full acknowledgement of such objects. I was concerned about how the data could be skewed if participants were not forthcoming about their object possession.

In my project design, I addressed both concerns in the information I gave participants about my project and again in the beginning of each interview. I stated that any object that feels

particularly significant to an individual participant would qualify. And I attempted to normalize the possession of objects by stating that through my preliminary conversations with adults, it became clear that many people possess and interact with significant objects. I also remind participants that the information they provided is confidential and anonymous. By normalizing the possession of objects, clearly stating what types of objects qualify, and referring to how information is kept private, I hoped to encourage participants to be open about their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Once interviews were completed, I transcribed and coded them in order to seek out trends within participant responses while also making note of the variation in responses. I did a thematic analysis of the data. I had two colleagues review a subset of interviews in order to achieve inter-rater reliability, and had the same two colleagues review the codes I found to achieve analytic triangulation. And I looked closely at data that contradicted my hypothesis.

Demographic data was used merely to acquire a description of my sample. Had cases arisen in which there was a clear possibility that demographic differences were linked to differences in the objects possessed and/or the meaning/role ascribed to objects, the data would have been analyzed using t-tests, anovas, and chi square.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

This study is an inquiry into the objects meaningful to American adults. In particular, I seek to shine light on the meanings ascribed to these objects and the way they function in people's lives. In the course of this study, I interviewed 29 adults, 10 who identify as male and 19 who identify as female, about their special objects. In this chapter, I briefly review my questions, and then lay out what was said in response.

My interview questions were constructed in an effort to elicit information about participants' special objects. I asked them to describe their object, to indicate why it is special, to tell me about where (or from whom) they got it, and when, and about the things that it reminds them of. I asked them how they interact with their object, where they keep it, how its meaning and/or role has changed over time, whether they could imagine losing it, whether they would bequeath it to someone, and if so, to what kind of person. I asked them what kind of person has an object like theirs, and what having their object(s) says about them. I also asked for general thoughts about their relationship with objects, and about the patterns they may see in how objects become special to them. And I asked them whether they were currently in a transition, and, when they answered yes, how they felt about that transition. I also asked follow-up questions based on the participants' responses.

To find the themes for this chapter, I first wrote down a list of things that I expected to find in the interviews, and put that aside. I then coded individual interviews, writing down the

specific themes that participants mentioned. I compared the interviews to each other, looking for patterns in participants' responses. And then I identified the themes that most directly responded to my thesis question. Participants found meaning both in the objects' functions and their form, and I selected these two themes as the overarching themes in my results: that objects have meaning within their form, and meaning within their function. I also noticed a theme of negative meanings within objects. And because my thesis also explores the concept of transitional object, I isolated two other themes: intensity of attachment, and periods of greatest object use. In retrospect, I would ask more pointed questions about these topics. However, my questions did generate some preliminary findings in those areas. In this chapter, I will lay out how people selected the objects that they talked about, and then itemize the actual objects that they discussed, and move onto a discussion of themes.

### **The Objects**

At the beginning of the interviews, many participants had difficulty choosing a single special object. At least half of the participants stated that they had several significant objects—as one participant put it,

I really like things. I have a lot of special objects... when I get the Christmas things out, I'm like, "Oh, yeah! That's a special thing!" I don't think about it the rest of the year but I'm so glad when I get it out...[and] I have certain things that remind me of my parents that are very special to me... and you know like I have an apron that belonged to my friend Winnie. Or when I look at the microwave I think of Mrs. Richards buying that for us...I have so many things that evoke so many people.

Two stated that *all* of their objects have significance. And four people, all male, initially declined to be interviewed because they felt they did not have *any* special objects; in other words, over 40% of my male participants were not initially aware that they had special objects.

The items that people focused on are as follows: a framed embroidery piece, prayer beads, a table, a framed dream catcher, a metal sculpture of flames, a cup, jewelry, a salt and pepper shaker set, a drawing, a photo of a participant's father, a photo of a participant's spiritual guru, a little lion sculpture, a chair, a carved figure, socks, a bicycle, a necklace, a train ball-bearing, a framed copy of the Fatiha, a violin, a knife, a guitar, a charm, two blankets, a stuffed bear, a stuffed dog, a stuffed elephant, and three rings.

The objects that were specifically mentioned as special though not focused on were: favorite books, boots, a knife, notebooks, a keychain, photos, art, greeting cards, an old high school ring, notes that [a participant's] children wrote to the tooth fairy, some of his children's teeth, t-shirts, a \$50 bill that was given to a participant by his father, a medicine bag, a bass, a piece of glass slag, a bracelet, a blanket, a cobblestone, a map, a desk, a wooden duck figurine, a stuffed monkey, a plastic chess piece, a rug, a tack hammer, a piece of string, a stone, seeds, pieces of cut glass, guitars, a poster of a participant playing at Carnegie Hall and one of him playing with his musical heroes, a cleaver, a rice cooker, a stuffed lobster, animal figurines, a piece of bronze, a photo of a participant's husband, more animal figurines, Christmas decorations, a platter, an apron, a microwave, a vase, the cross-section of a branch from a plum tree, a small cup, a necklace, a bag, a dresser, rocks, crystals, jewelry, paintings, a voicemail recording from a participant's deceased grandmother, nail clippers and grooming kit from a participant's deceased father, calligraphy, a hammer, two Tibetan singing bowls, a letter, rocks, a concrete frog, special dishes, the ashes of a participant's father, a decorative chicken, notes and

cards, a charm, a necklace, a note from an ex-lover, tzadaka, a marble, a worry doll, and a pin recognizing service to Outward Bound.

In the Merriam Webster dictionary, meaning is defined as “the significant quality” and the “implication of a hidden or special significance.” The word significance is defined as the “quality of being important.” I found that in this study, participants considered objects special for a variety of reasons, spanning both form and function. I identified themes by individually coding each interview and then identifying commonalities within the group of interviews.

### **Meaning Within Form**

Most of my participants’ objects were identified as meaningful—in part or in whole—for possessing a superlative and satisfying physical quality, be it visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, energetic, or due to their size or sturdiness. When describing the objects, twelve people stated that they have objects that are significant—either partially or completely—because they are “beautiful” or visually appealing (they “[bring me] aesthetic pleasure”). Similarly, nine participants emphasized that they regularly look at their objects, in comments such as “I look at [it] almost every night before I go to bed,” “I see him every day and he fills my heart,” “I look at it,” “I love to look at it”; many find it satisfying, it seems, to catch sight of the object.

Interestingly, three participants noted explicitly and relatively quickly that their objects are not objectively good-looking; one mentioned that while her stuffed bear “was pristine white back in the day, now... he has no nose, he has bald patches, he has his butt stain, he’s completely dented, like his stuffing is warped around... [he] looks bad”; another spoke of how his special blanket was “in all fairness... not by any means a good-looking blanket”; the third discussed the first time she saw her violin: “I opened it up, and actually my first thought was ‘Oh, that’s ugly.’” These individuals stressed that their objects had other superlative physical

characteristics—the bear is remarkably soft and has a “nice shape,” the blanket’s texture is satisfying, and the violin has an appealingly “dark, mellow” tone that the owner has found so compelling that she now finds the violin physically beautiful: “It’s probably like giving birth to an ugly baby, and your first thought is like, ‘Oh my God, what is that,’ and then you think it’s the most beautiful thing.... It [was] kind of not love at first sight, but love at first, whatever it would be.”

Two participants called attention to their object’s weight; as one put it, “I love the weight of [the train ball-bearing], that’s the thing that gets me the most.” Eight admired the object’s feel; “I liked the way [the ring] felt,” stated one participant, while another noted that her violin “just felt really,... just lovely;” a third noted that her object is nicely “cool to the touch.” Along similar lines, nine stated that they regularly “hold,” “grasp,” or “pick up” their objects—“I love to pick it up and hold it in my palm,” “I reach up... and grasp the charm,” “[I have] a piece of bronze that I love to hold in my hand.” Nine more stated that they like to “touch” their objects, like a participant whose object has a string that she’ll “sometimes tug on... like little ‘hellos.” And one particularly likes to press the object against her nose and mouth. Six remarked on the texture of their special objects—a blanket is “almost like the texture of a knitted scarf... definitely calming,” two stuffed animals are “super soft,” a stone is “really smooth.”

Three participants remarked on their object’s smell, stating that “the [necklaces] still smell like [my grandma]” or “[my dad’s grooming kit and a little box] still smelled like him... like a mixture of cedar and plain chapstick,” and “[Blankie] just smells like, I feel him in my heart when I smell him.” When these three were asked how they interact with their objects, two stated directly that they “smell it,” one explaining more thoroughly: “smelling [my Blankie] and touching him when he’s cold. When he’s hot, he’s not really that useful. Even the smell when

he's hot is not that useful. I breathe, when I breathe him in I breathe really deeply. And... and that's what I do. If I crave Blankie—there's times that I don't interact with Blankie that much, but once in a while I crave him, and what I crave is just sticking my nose in him and smelling him.... He feels really nice on my lips too.”

Three commented on the sturdiness of the object as a point of admiration. Discussing her salt and pepper set, one participant stated, “I think it's significant that so many things got broken in our family, there were... 6 kids, ...but these... came through. Never got broken. I'm sure they got dropped. But they must be solid.” Another noted that her violin is appealingly not “too thin and not too fragile.”

A few of my participants talked about the “energy” or “vibrations” that their object held—two intriguing terms that convey not only spiritual but also physical aspects of the objects. The objects are perceived to possess an energy that can physically transform one's own energy. Thus, a participant notes, his prayer beads “absorb the energy of [his] practice” when he prays with them, and also bring him back into that energy when he is near them, “turn[ing his] mind toward... the spiritual.” Another participant notes that she sometimes finds herself placing her water glass near her framed copy of the Fatiha, the opening verses of the Koran:

I usually have a glass of water on my desk, and sometimes I'll place it right in front of the prayer. So I think about the energy that certain words have or that certain objects have, and this piece, it has a lot of positive energy around it, because it reminds me of my mother and because they are holy words, and so I think about the way that energy can affect the environment and can affect water. So sometimes I'll put my glass of water in front of it and hope that it absorbs some of the good energy.

This positive energy represents a spiritual quality as well as a physical, and we will return to this.

Notably, several participants emphasize that some of their objects are significant only because of their physical qualities; they love these objects for themselves. “Some things,” one participant states, “I like just because they’re beautiful.” Another, when asked about general attachment to objects, states: “I don’t know, either if I think something’s really cute, or something’s really smooth, or something’s really pretty, or really sparkly. Or anything. I’m just like, wow, you’re really cute, I need to have this object, I want to have this object. Even if it’s something you don’t interact with, and it just sits on the shelf, I just look at it and I’m like, ‘Oh, you’re so cute!’ or, ‘Oh, you’re so round!’ ‘You’re so this!’ ‘You’re so that!’”

A few participants struggled with whether their objects had any specialness for their physical attributes. One stated that her special object—or rather, one of them, a copy of the Fatiha—is, “not precious... as an object”; however, she also stated that the object has a palpable energy, indicating that some aspect of its physicality is, indeed, important. Another participant stated, at one point, that his blanket is “skating by on pure nostalgia,” yet later stated that it had a “medicinal” component and a satisfying texture; these participants, while not reaching a conclusion about whether their objects have physical significance, or affect them physically, stress that the non-physical aspects of their object are most important. Similarly, many other participants stressed that the physical dimension of their objects is not the most important, while also making statements such as the possessor of a special chair, who states, “it wouldn’t be quite as special if I just didn’t like it.”

### **Meaning Within Function**

I found that in my interviews, participants indicated object function both in how they described the objects and their descriptions of how they interact with their objects. Participants categorized their objects in a variety of ways: “comfort object” or “comforting” thing; “totem;

;“emblem”; “charm”; “talisman”; promoter of “luck”; protective thing; conduit of positive energy; “access point” or “portal”; thing that connects to others and “keeps people close”; “time capsule”; “magical” thing; “transporting” thing; “prevent[er] of homesickness”; thing that helps bless ones endeavors; “love object”; “magnet” for positive energy; “guide”; thing that inspires wonder/awe; thing that connects one to the Divine; source of inspiration; stimulator of thoughts; companion; communication of one’s identity; reminder of one’s identity; “symbol”; object that assists in bringing about sexual climax; “tool”; “burden” or “obligation”; “medicinal” thing; “supportive” thing; sign of one’s authority/adulthood; “part of me”; part of a ritual or prayer; part of a routine; thing for difficult times; thing for when one is especially missing the presence of another; thing for travel; souvenir; thing that helps one to understand another person; and “remnant.”

Though we should bear in mind that single objects are multifaceted, described in multiple ways and occupying multiple functions, we can nevertheless group these functions into rough clusters. Several participants’ language points to the objects’ function as signifiers of affiliation or membership in a group. By the same token, they often refer to the objects’ function in promoting one’s own sense of identity; objects simultaneously announce one’s affiliation to the outside world and to oneself, reminding oneself of one’s responsibility to that group.

One participant, for example, explains how his wedding ring is a sign of his “commitment” to his spouse and community, which also marks him as “taken” and signifies that he is “no longer a man-child.” A knife marks membership in the group of people who know how to live off the land, connecting a participant to the people he knows “back home” in the Upper Peninsula, Michigan. A string of prayer beads, defined simultaneously as an “emblem,” a “declaration,” and a “reminder” (among other things), acts, in these roles, as a marker of the



participant's commitment to and membership in a particular spiritual community, and as a personal "reminder" of his chosen "path." One participant notes that her ring marks her as a "educated, upper class, a[n]... anthropologist with whom you should meet, please and thank you, [and]... someone who only *looks* fifteen years old"; she notes that she wears the ring when she "want[s] to play up the 'anthropologist' bit for status and authority."

The participant with the violin remarks that the violin is a mark of identity and affiliation as well; she stated:

I think most of the violinists and cellists I've met are similar...other instruments aren't as expensive, or... as valuable, there's not that mystique around them as much as the violin, I feel like. There's a unique character that's created a lot of myth and fantasy and all these things. I feel like violinists have been convinced by that, or have bought into that, or also believe that, or whatever.

Another participant described how her carved wooden figure and other objects are:

not only important for sentimentality, but also as a way to identify myself. Seeing these in my day reminds me of different sides of my life or collected history and they all are important, when I sit down to make art or just in knowing myself.... They kind of describe parts of myself that are too hard to relate with just words.... I also come from a family of collectors and people that have a keen eye for aesthetics. So I feel like it links me to my family.

With both the violin and the carved figure, there is a sense that the thing is something that people like their possessors would have; it marks them as part of a group with a specific identity and shared traits.

An overwhelming number of participants talked about how their objects bring them closer to special people, places, places, and/or times. This is described in a range of ways, with a variety of metaphors. Some participants spoke about how the objects bring the participant toward the special person/place—for example, when described as an “entry point” or “portal”, or as a thing that “transports...[a participant] into [her] own little world”:

I can be anywhere in the world, like on a boat that breaks down and I’m sitting on a riverbank, and I can play songs that I know from other people, from other places, from other times, and it really prevents me from being homesick.

At other times the objects are said to pull the special people and/or places close—as when a participant says, “The objects that are important to me make the people that are important to me present...they tie me to people that are important to me,” stating “for example, for many years I carried around in my wallet a \$50 bill that I had been given by my father.” Many speak of the object as a “remnant” of a particular era, as “mementos,” or “souvenirs.” Still another conjures the object as a “glimpse, this time capsule back into another time.” And more speak of the object “evoking” people. The general feeling is that they either keep a special person, place, or time close, or bring them back. Perhaps both.

The memories of special people, places, and times that these objects evoke are rich and detailed. One participant discussed how her chair reminds her of “being a child at [her] grandmother’s house”; she states:

When I was a child I could curl myself up in one chair at the dining room table...I have so many memories of being in [that] house in Michigan and folding myself into this chair on a cold morning... sitting in that chair in their house, having conversations with my grandfather.

Another participant repeatedly described his blanket as the “only thing I have from growing up,” stating that his childhood house:

Belongs to someone else, the couch is long gone, you know, everything is gone except for this. Luckily my parents are still around now but that won't always be the case... certainly at that point the worth and value of this blanket will just skyrocket.

When asked why it's special, he stated:

I just feel an emotional connection to it... using it when I was sick, or just kind of cold...it's so funny, when I think about the blanket I immediately have mental images of that. Or like I would get really cold and pull it completely over me... that's how I picture myself as a child, just getting warm in this blanket... [and] road trips and stuff,... we would get up really early in the morning, like my parents wanted to leave early for a road trip or whatever, so you are kind of woken up just enough to be put in the car and then sleep for the first few hours of the trip. And so I definitely remember a lot of those, going up to Kansas with this blanket, and you know like spilling food or drink on it. Or shutting it in the car door and having part of it, a corner of it be like gross because it's been out of the car for like 100 miles.

Not only does his object evoke a memory, it feels, to him, like the *only* object that can do so.

Another participant talked about how an object, prayer beads, reminds him of one of his earliest memories, of sitting on his father's lap as his father meditated, hearing his father's humming.

And still another described how her toy elephant evokes her childhood home in Russia, stating, “It bring[s] very strong visceral memories of my grandmother's apartment.”

Often this connection comes when one uses, wears, or interacts with the object. As one participant states, “I still use the rice cooker that we bought when we first moved to the United

States from Trinidad... I prefer to have it because it has so many memories.” Another states, “[My mother] touched [these salt and pepper shakers] every day, I touch them every day; it’s a link with [my parents].” Still another states, “When I wear [my grandmother’s ring] I feel connected to her, which is especially meaningful to me because I didn’t have a very close relationship with her, but I kind of wish I had.” And finally, one states, “When I look at [this opening line from the Koran] I think of [my mother] and her love for me and her love for my family, and I also think of her love for the Divine, and her beliefs.”

When objects evoke special people—often because they were made by, given by, used with, used to belong to, or were selected with them—the people were described as in some way superlative: “she was a classy, artistic lady... [with] really good taste”; “she was a great cook”; “he was such a social man... jovial”; “they were married for 68 years”; “she’s funny and brave and brilliant and terrible at maps and does not take shit, especially from me.” Often participants connect the superlative characteristics of their special people to a sense of pride—sometimes in the object itself or the stories attached, sometimes in their affiliation with the people. Sometimes it reminds participants of special qualities that they themselves would like to emulate (one talks of the object symbolizing a relationship that she wants her own relationship to be like, another talks about an object that reminds her to be like her mother). And often the objects evoke the person’s love—“I think about the love that she offers”; “this [object] says that [I am] loved.”

Beyond (or in addition to) connecting to special people, places, times, and communities, some objects connect their possessors to something much larger. One talks about how her copy of the Fatiha connects her not only to her mother, but to the “Divine”; looking at the Fatiha or chanting the words creates “a quick moment for [her] to connect, to pause, and remember that there’s something greater than [her].” Another talks about how his prayer beads bring him to a

“state beyond,” putting him in towards “infinite consciousness.” Another speaks about how her carved figure “holds some sort of magic,” implying that he connects her to something mysterious and awe provoking. And another describes how contemplating her object, a train ball-bearing, makes her feel awe and wonder: “It makes me think of things on a scale much larger than myself, [and] it makes me think about humanity in a way that I don’t usually think about humanity.”

Some participants emphasize that their objects function to comfort them. Two talk about how the comfort of the object comes through its ability to connect them to other people, other places. One notes that her violin’s ability to make her feel “connected” to home, and to treasured people and music, also helps her to feel “comforted.” She states:

At one point [in my new home in Malaysia] I found myself in a car, like riding through these jungle roads in this car, and I was sitting in the back and playing like Hank Williams Sr. songs. And it’s so funny, because I didn’t even realize it, but it is my own little world in that little wooden box. Like, I can completely be transported and it’s a huge comfort.

Another states that her ring – which “reminds [her] of her [friend]—not only how great she is as a person, but that she thinks I’m pretty OK too”—is something that brings her “emotional support.” Some of the comfort in these things seems to emanate from their ability to bring forth other people and other times.

Others also have objects that make them feel “comforted” and “calm,” but trace this comfort exclusively back to the objects themselves; something about the actual make-up of the objects is, they note, comforting. Along these lines, one participant states that the presence of her object, Blankie, makes her feel tremendously “calm” and “satisfied.” She marvels at the

fortuitousness that led to her having such an “optimal” object, stating “it could have been, I mean if [the maker] had made something slightly different, I maybe wouldn’t have Blankie in my life.” She also notes that her blanket feels like “part of [her].” For this participant, and one other participant with a soft comfort objects, there is something significant and very meaningful—as well as serendipitous—about the object’s ability to make one feel comforted, calm, and able to sleep—without evoking anything else.

For many people, there is a sense that their objects are tremendously rare, and precious for their rareness. Sometimes this is because of the objects’ point of origin; they come from people who are now deceased, or they are from a place or time one can’t return to, and are precious because they are the last remaining thing (or one of the last remaining things) from something that is gone. Thus one participant speaks of his blanket as a “remnant,” the only remaining piece of his childhood. And one woman’s embroidery piece was made by a woman who is now deceased; it’s irreplaceable.

In some cases the sense of rareness is connected to the sense, again, that the object is the culmination of serendipitous events that are impossible to fully know and just as impossible to reproduce. Two of the possessors of cozy things and the woman who possesses a violin indicate that they do not wholly understand what makes their objects so evocative. Plus, in the case of the violin owner, it took years to find the right instrument and even then it felt like chance that she stumbled upon it. There is a sense that these individuals, not knowing exactly what components make their objects so wonderful, would never be able to replace their thing if it was lost. Thus, interestingly, two have evolved strategies to prolong the lives of their objects—one has bought replacement fur for her stuffed bear and one has had people knit extensions of her blanket; the violinist treats her object with the utmost care, declining to bring it on trips. These three (and one

other) also comment on their reluctance to let others hold their objects: one states, “I carry [my violin because]... I don’t want anyone else to have that responsibility; I didn’t want to.... blame [my boyfriend]...[when he appeared to have lost my violin] I just kind of despised him for his carelessness;” another states that when her infant grabs her special bear, she thinks ““Oh my god! I’m putting it into harm’s way... I just have to tell myself it’s okay.” Not letting others hold the object helps to preserve the longevity of the special object, and also to preserve one’s relationship with special people (who might accidentally harm the object and/or treat it in some way that feels wrong, thus changing how the object possessor feels toward that special person [or, perhaps, vice-versa]). And it speaks to the sense that the object is irreplaceable, precious and rare.

Many of the participants looked to their objects for protection and/or luck, good energy and/or emotional health. Three talked about things that bring good luck. One keeps a charm in his truck, and:

When I am driving and feel concerned about my truck (usually because it’s not running smoothly or something feels amiss), I reach up...and grasp the charm,... and try to direct energy through my hand, through the charm, into the truck... when I interact with this charm, I *mean* it. It is like a prayer... [the charm becomes] like an intermediary between my intention and the physical world.

This participant states that he feels more in control and less anxious when he grasps the charm, as if protected. Another speaks about a bracelet that her boyfriend made her, which she brings when traveling or at interviews:

You know, it’s like a, I don’t really believe in luck in a serious way, but... if I’m not feeling confident about a job, say, I like to wear that bracelet, because it makes me think

of him and it makes me... think of my support system at home... I think it totally gives me an edge.

Another travels with some Arabic calligraphy that her mother wrote:

In the Islamic tradition there are like 99 qualities that are associated with the Divine, and so you can call upon one of those qualities, or I mean any of those qualities to help you with a specific issue that you're facing. And so for instance before I left to travel she wrote one of the qualities that meant the protector or something like that to kind of keep me safe while I was traveling about.

As I mentioned earlier, some participants spoke about their objects as conduits of positive energy or some even state medicine. As one participant spelled it out:

I believe there is medicine in everything. You might wish to carry with you in your "medicine bag" things that represent for you positive, healing experiences or persons... for example, every time I see or use something from [my daughter] or that I associated with her it brings her into my consciousness and connects me with my love for her.

Another echoes this sentiment, stating that the feeling of calm and well-being that comes over him when he's under his childhood blanket makes him feel that it is in some way "medicinal."

In terms of what one does *to* the object, participants reported that they, as stated earlier, touch and hold and look at and breathe in the smell of their objects. They also "care for" their objects, "dote on" them, "protect them"—by hiding them, not using them, or carefully wrapping them when they need to be transported. In obtaining their objects, many spoke of "rescuing" them from people who might have thrown them away or left them unappreciated. Participants also spoke of adoring their objects, protecting the feelings of their objects, and contemplating their objects. They wear their objects, and use their objects. One talks to her objects. Some



objects are simply kept. Some participants think about purging their objects. Some keep their objects on display in semi-public locations, several keep special objects in the more “private,” “inner” space of the bedroom, some keep objects in their wallets, or cars, or workspaces.

Interestingly, there is some ambiguity or tension between whether one does to one’s object or one’s object does something to oneself, or both. Similarly, where one does something to or for the object, there is a tension between whether one does this thing for the object’s sake or for one’s own sake—for example, to enhance the impact of the object, or both. There seems to be dynamic play—that is, a continuous shifting—between these aspects.

Interwoven throughout these functions is a sense that the objects make one *feel* something, usually something positive. Interacting with an object that is felt to be protective makes one participant feel “more in control.” When people find that the object connects them to special people, they often describe feeling “loved,” or “comforted.” When people talk about the object as a marker of an important identity, they talk about feeling “respect[ed] or “proud.” When participants talk about objects as reminders of identity, they reflect a sense that coming into contact with the object helps them to feel more themselves. When the objects are presented as connecting one to something larger than oneself, participants indicate that they feel “fascinate[d],” or full of a sense of awe. One simply remarked that the object makes her feel “full in her heart,” and another that when she sees her object she “feels him in her heart.”

### **Negative Meanings**

In several interviews, people remarked on how their objects sometimes take on negative associations, functioning, in part, as sources of anxiety, guilt, shame, regret, sadness and/or longing, or as a “burden” or “obligation.” Many spoke of anxiety about the loss of their objects; many stated something along the lines of “I don’t want to think about [its loss].” A few, as

mentioned above, talked about the object “dying” or “disappearing,” and their efforts to forestall the object’s destruction: “I really get worried about Blankie dying before I die... it’s incredibly upsetting, like I don’t even want to think about it too much.” Several talked about the traumatic loss of special objects—one stated, “when the house burned down... I lost everything.” Another wrote, “I threw away my dead mother’s wedding ring in a dumpster accidentally when I was taking out the trash, and I didn’t notice for three days,” and a third stated, “I’ve lost enough stuff over the years that I can imagine losing just about anything....and it would super suck.” Another said, “We got burglarized, and now I have a habit of hiding things in weird places and then forgetting where I put them.” Another talked about the loss of his physical reminders of his childhood home: “My parents moved from the house that I grew up in... it was so weird... you come back and everything’s mixed up and you don’t, they have new furniture now, and it was just so not welcoming.”

Two spoke specifically about their heartbreak over lost objects. Says one participant, “It is a big deal, you know, it is a big deal... I can’t just replace it like that... I [was] heartbroken....It is the only thing that I own of any value and also of any sentimental value and any personal attachment.” Another woman said, about a lost voicemail, “When I had to accept that I had lost it somehow, that it had disappeared, I was devastated... my grandmother was just like, ‘I’m calling to talk about the wedding and call me back.’ And my grandmother does not call me. We are not a phone chatting family. This was you know... it was a significant voicemail, and totally sweet, and I used to replay it all the time when I’d miss her, and it’s gone, and I don’t know how to get it back. I don’t think I can.” The anticipation of losing an object tends, it seems, to bring anxiety, and the actual loss brings intense sadness and longing. This sadness is particularly magnified when the object is from/connected to a deceased person, or in some other

way one of a kind, and cannot be replaced. This applies to an era that cannot be replaced as well. One participant talked about how giving away a decorative rooster that she had during her first marriage brought about an onslaught of tears:

This is what is so funny, is now I'm gonna cry thinking about this again. It's almost like it signified that era of my life, and getting rid of it was stepping across that divide, letting go of that chapter... acknowledging the finality of it all, even though it was done... I had no idea when I [committed to giving the rooster away] that it was going to have that kind of reaction for me ...But I mailed it away! I mailed it away!

Sometimes the amount of significance in a particular object can take people by surprise, and devastate them.

Some spoke about “guilt” around their objects. One man had recently moved his deceased father’s guitar from the living room—a place of prominence and frequent use—to an upstairs bedroom, more tucked away, and expressed guilt about this, stating that he felt he was doing his father wrong though he felt silly for feeling guilty. Another spoke about feeling, perhaps not guilt, but regret, sometimes, when she looks at the ring she inherited from her grandmother: “I wish that I’d known her as an adult...[Seeing her things and this ring made me realize] how much we had in common and how little I’d realized that and taken advantage of that,... talking with her about it all.”

Three participants spoke about guilt not toward the person connected to the object, but toward the objects themselves. One person connected with me after mulling over the reason that she does not want to get rid of the many small animal figurines that she has; she noticed that:

“The thought of giving away a thing makes me feel bad for the thing itself. Like I would feel I was treating the lobster poorly if I gave it away. I think that’s

actually a reason I keep some things. Not that I actually think they have feelings but they get personified. Especially things with faces. Sounds crazy!”

Another spoke of “demoting” her cobblestone from a prime position on a display shelf down to a more lowly position as a doorstep; when we discussed this demotion, she stated:

I don’t love it as much as the ball bearing and the hunk of glass... I still love it but not equally... I felt a little guilty denying the cobblestone, even though it’s a giant hunk of rock,... I mean, not like genuine guilt, but there was a twinge of “ohhhh.”

When I quipped that she might tell the cobblestone, “Sorry, you used to be special,” the participant stated quickly, “No you still are, you still are, but, [whispering] not as special.” And another participant spoke of her mixed feelings around becoming less desirous of her special Blankie; she notices that she brings him along on travels partially out of a sense of obligation, a feeling that “it would hurt his feelings” if she left him behind, that she’ll “feel guilty if he doesn’t come with,” though, she notes, the blanket possesses so many positive qualities that these “way overpower any actual feelings of resentment.”

Some of my participants commented on the way special objects can, at times, feel like a “burden.” This term seemed to arise with the idea that one needed to keep a special object for a diseased relative, or in order to sustain the memories. One participant, talking about his bicycle, which he inherited from his father, says, “I think when I wanted to get rid of it, it was like it would no longer be this burden, this thing that I have to take around with me.” He even states that giving it to his children would feel like “passing on a burden”: “I wouldn’t care if they lost it, but I think they would then really care if they lost it.” There is some sense of obligation involved with the object, for these participants. Others spoke of a similar sense of obligation when given special objects, especially in the wake of not wanting too many objects: “They can

be a burden, physically, just to deal with... to carry around, to store, to sort.” Along these lines, one participant spoke of how her husband has asked his parents, who tend to hoard, to narrow down their special objects before they pass:

He said, “Don’t assume that we will go through it all when you die. If you mark every box as important, they’re all gonna be thrown.” We’re kind of working with them on this place of, “Don’t think that we’re gonna think everything is important too....” We’ve been a little forceful with them.

Another spoke of wanting her children to know that they did not need to keep things that they did not want, “Like, you’re welcome to have this, I hope you love it, but I don’t want you to feel obligated to take it because most of us have way too many things anyhow.” She also doesn’t want her children to fight over things, because, as her mother said at her death, “Nothing here is worth going to hell for.”

Three participants articulated that they sometimes feel that keeping objects makes them feel less “free.” One states:

It’s always the funny pull between having attachment to things and wanting to be free enough to let go of them... I feel like you can get stuck in a place if you’re just always in the past and trying to recreate the past.

Another stated that her connection to her Blankie arose out of a “feeling of really deep loneliness” in her childhood, and that its use is still “about me being by myself,” but “sometimes I feel like there’s something wrong with my desire to be alone.” She stated that she has recently started to critique the reasons that she craves Blankie.

This brings me to the final negative feeling associated with objects: shame. Three participants, all with soft objects, expressed deep attachment to their objects and also some

shame. The participant I just spoke about explicitly articulated shame only in the past tense, but implicitly in her sense that being attached to Blankie is potentially unhealthy, even pathological. The participant with the teddy bear stated often, “it’s so weird,” but also expressed determination to keep her object:

It’s weird to explain to people, but I’m like, dude, I do not feel at all wrong about sleeping with my teddy bear. You just get him right in the perfect little spot, and you’re like instantly, like aaah, now I want to sleep. Magical powers.

Another noted, “When I say it out loud it sounds weird. Like, I’m 29 years old and I sleep with a stuffed animal?” But she also noted that if her stuffed animal was damaged she would “die on the inside”:

I’d probably have to transition if I was gonna get a new one. But it would also be weird to get a new stuffed animal... it’d be like, now I’m just a 30-year old person buying a stuffed animal, that makes it even weirder. It’s acceptable that I’ve slept with him for like, 10 years, but if I went out and got a new one? ... I mean, you grow up and have kids, and you’re like, “Do I still sleep with a stuffed animal?” And then, “Yep, I guess I do!”

Even those without stuffed animals noted that some of their feelings and behaviors “sound strange.” The general sentiment, in these moments, was that the participant realized that what he or she felt would sound and even seem strange, but that it was how they felt; as one participant put it, “It sounds crazy when I spell it out like this, but that’s really what I do.”

### **Intensity of Attachment**

A few of my questions were aimed at eliciting information about the intensity of participants’ attachment to their objects. One question was whether they would bequeath their object to anyone and if so, to whom in specific, or to what kind of person in general; when they

would bequeath it; and what they would tell the recipient about the object. My working assumption was that a desire to bequeath the object would indicate intensity of attachment. However, I found that this assumption was flawed; for example, the three participants with soft, cuddly objects all indicated that they had intense attachment to their objects, but they also stated that they would never give their object away. As one participant put it, “I need it more than anyone else... I am the needy one.”

Another question more directly addressed the issue of intensity of attachment. I asked participants whether they could imagine losing their object, and what that would be like. Significantly, most participants stated that they didn't want to think about that, because it was provoked feelings of anxiety and sadness. Most changed the subject quickly or gave a curt response. One stated that talking about her object's potential loss made her want to go home quickly and take a picture of it. For another, talking about lost objects made her want to renew her search for a dear object that she had lost. And five spoke about how they would immediately try to replace their objects (though, they all stated, the replacement wouldn't be the same). Almost all expressed that they would be sad if they lost the object (though of these, almost all reassured me—or themselves?—that the object's loss wouldn't completely destroy them; they could get over it). Two of the participants with soft objects spoke about their keen awareness that their objects were being worn away with cuddling; one described her realization as a moment when she thought, “Oh my God! He's dying!,” which prompted her to buy replacement fur for her teddy bear. The other has made multiple efforts to prolong the life of her blanket since she was a child; one grandmother has knitted more blanket onto the original blanket, but it doesn't quite work. This participant also uses the word dying to talk about the loss of her object, and she spoke frankly about her intense need to not lose her blanket:

A: I really get worried about Blankie dying before I die.

Q: What would that be like?

A: Oh, I would, it's incredibly upsetting, like I don't even want to think about it too much because yeah, he feels very, very much feels like he needs to be with me for my entire life.

Q: And then after that?

A: He doesn't need to be there.

Q: Does he need to be buried with you?

A: No. I mean, that would be nice. But no.

Q: What would be nice about that?

A: It sounds comforting.

The participants with the soft objects, as well as the one with the violin, communicated that they would be devastated if their objects were lost. The participant with the train ball-bearing stated that this particular object's loss would not devastate her—she would not cry at its loss, whereas she would if she lost a more special object. Most participants stated that they would feel sad, and keenly feel the loss, if their object disappeared or was damaged; one participant's response is typical: "Um, gosh. I think I'd feel really bad for a while." Only one person stated that she could not conceive of losing her object and was not worried about it.

Several people spoke about the measures they take to protect and safe-keep their objects, and these efforts speak to intensity of object attachment. Since having had her house robbed, one participant no longer wears her grandmother's ring but keeps it hidden in a secret place in her home. Others too, discuss not using their objects in order to preserve them; a platter, for example, feels too precious and fragile to use. One participant divided her objects into things she



would toss into a box when moving, and things she would wrap carefully—her special object would be bubble wrapped inside a box, and then placed inside another box. Four participants—again, the three who possess soft objects and the one with the violin—talked about the danger of letting others hold their objects, lest they harm them, and their preference to hold onto their objects themselves.

Finally, roughly half of the participants spoke about having moved their special object(s), many several times. Those who brought this up indicated that it showed something about the intensity of their attachment. Moving, many said, is a time of weeding out unimportant things, winnowing down to the most important and necessary. They found it telling when the special object(s) made the cut.

Based on these responses, I found participants to be significantly attached to their objects. Participants indicated a desire to hold onto their object(s), and a history of having protected and transported their object(s). Many became anxious at the thought of losing their objects, and some talked about their sadness when they had lost other special objects.

### **Periods of Increased Object Use**

I found that participants seem to use their objects more intensely in difficult and/or precarious times. Four talked about using special objects when traveling, one about using his blanket when sick, another surrounded himself with special objects during chemotherapy, and two spoke of using their lucky object when they need luck: One clutches his charm when his car is ailing, the other uses her lucky bracelet when interviewing for jobs. Many talked about using their objects when in need of comfort. Some spoke about using their object when they particularly miss the person/people associated with the object. For example, one woman spoke about wearing special jewelry on holidays, when she most acutely misses the woman who

bequeathed her the jewelry. Another specified that she listens to a voicemail from her deceased grandmother when she most misses her.

### **Transition**

I asked participants whether they were currently in a transition. This question was shaped by the literature on objects, particularly by the idea that special objects function most intensely within transitions. Interestingly, 12 of my participants stated that they were in a transition, and five more stated that they were always in transition (one participant stating simply, “Life is kind of just one big transition.”) Four stated that they were maybe in a transition (“yes and no”; “well, define transition”; “it’s kind of debatable”). And only three of my participants stated that they weren’t currently in a transition. My findings indicate that the majority of participants were in a self-identified transition at the time of their interviews; this could be interpreted in a few different ways, and I will pursue this topic further in the next chapter.

### **Conclusion**

My findings indicate that participants attach significant meaning to their objects. This meaning is indicated in the way participants conceptualize their objects’ functions: to comfort, to assert and symbolize affiliation and identity, to evoke special people and places and time periods and relationships, to connect one to the Divine or to a larger perspective on humanity, to soothe and/or heal and/or conduct positive energy, and/or to bring good luck. This meaning is also conveyed in the way participants conceptualize their special objects’ forms.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

In this thesis, I am attempting to determine the meaning and function that special objects hold for American adults. My findings seem to indicate that special objects have a multifaceted range of meanings and functions that are substantial and core. In this chapter, I will discuss how that outcome relates to some of the extant literature on object use.

Special objects seem to hold deep significance. For my participants, they evoke strong feelings, and often connect participants to special people, places, and times. Participants found meaning both in their objects' forms and functions, and their attachment to the objects was, as Sherry Turkle (2007) has commented, "startling[ly] intens[e]" (p. 6). In discussing these special objects, we moved quickly into a place that seemed very core and personal, yet outside of conscious awareness; it was not uncommon for participants to get emotional or to state that they rarely, if ever, verbalized the things we were discussing, and were often surprised both by how their feelings and thoughts sounded in speech.

In this chapter, I first discuss the demographic variation that emerged in this study. Then I discuss the meaning found in form, and relate that to the literature. I next discuss the meaning found in objects' functions, and relate that to the literature. I then discuss the negative meanings associated with objects. I end by discussing the intensity of object attachment, and the suggestion that that intensity increases during difficult times, considering the implications that these findings might have within a conversation about transitional objects.

## **Demographic Variation**

As stated in the findings, this study suggests that special objects are a feature of American adult lives. Some participants mentioned that they have only one special object, but more often participants commented on having many, to the point that they had difficulty picking only one to talk about. Yet significantly, four out of ten of the male-identified participants in this study initially declined to participate because they did not think that they had any special objects. In each case, I suggested that the participant get in touch if they recalled any special objects, and all did, talking at length and conveying attachment and significance that was similar to other participants.

This gender variation is significant and interesting. Again, are male-identified individuals less aware of their special objects? Do they simply have fewer of them? Or both? Are we socialized to find female object attachment more acceptable than male? What kinds of objects are more acceptable for male identified individuals to be publicly attached to? What is the impact of social norms on all of participants' responses? The significant variation between male and female identified participants suggests that there are different prescriptions and proscriptions on object use for different genders. While responses could also be impacted by how participants relate to and perceive the interviewer, those perceptions and relations may also be informed by gender constructs. Future research could explore these questions in more depth, connecting socio-cultural understandings to individual understandings of special objects.

It would not surprise me if future research showed that there were significant patterns around the physical form of things that people attach to, influenced by gender as well as age, race, ethnicity, geographic location, religion, and class. This information will emerge through continued research.

## Meaning Within Form

I would like to turn now to the findings about the meaning within objects' forms. As previously discussed, participants admired many of their objects—in part and occasionally in whole—for possessing a superlative and satisfying physical quality: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, energetic, or due their size, or sturdiness. Correspondingly, they expressed that they loved to look at their objects, listen to them, smell them, feel them, press them against their lips, hold them, and/or be near them.

This finding reminds us quite viscerally that we are discussing physical objects. This reaffirms Leora Auslander's (2005) emphatic—and curiously appropriate—reminder that humans are embodied. There is something interesting about the need for reminders that we are physical beings, and that we engage with special objects on a physical level as well as an intellectual one. Jane Bennett (2009) observed that we resist thinking about ourselves as matter and thinking about matter as active, an observation that is supported by the need for reminders of that very thing. She notes that we avoid these topics because thinking “tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota, [drawing] human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans,” and this goes against our traditional tendency to “identify and defend what is special about Man” (p. 115). It is interesting and important that the findings of this study draw us back to the realization of our basic physicality and the way that objects physically act upon us.

People physically interact with their objects—even special objects that may seem to have no practical function, and participants spoke of engaging many more senses than simply sight. The enthusiasm for engaging with objects, physically, was apparent: “I love to pick it up and

hold it in my palm;” “I reach up... and grasp the charm;” “[I have] a piece of bronze that I love to hold in my hand;” “I smell [the jewelry]... it still smells like my grandma;” “I feel him in my heart when I smell him;” “I look at [it] almost every night before I go to bed;” “I see him every day and he fills my heart;” “I look at it;” “I love to look at it.” It is through this—physical—interaction that the objects are able to perform their functions: to evoke feelings and thoughts, communicate one’s affiliation with groups and identity as an individual, and more functions that we shall discuss.

The meaning participants found within their objects’ form also draws attention to how rarely the literature addresses the physicality of objects; few researchers or clinicians emphasize the physical characteristics of objects, with the important exception of D.W. Winnicott. Winnicott (1971) observed that infants’ transitional objects are often soft objects such as a “bundle of wool or the corner of a blanket or eiderdown” (p.5), or a “teddy, a doll, or a soft toy” (p.2), though he acknowledged that sometimes an infant does attach to a hard object (p.2). He found that the feel of the object seemed significant as infants chose (or in a sense) created their transitional objects, and he made a cursory observation that children turn to hard objects at a later stage in their development. Study findings suggest that adults variously find the look, feel, smell, and/or other physical aspects of their special objects important. It is possible that the greater variety of sensory detail and sensory specialness in this study reflects a difference in how infants and adults experience objects, but it could also reflect the fact that an adult population can communicate about subjective experience and we need not rely only on outside observation.

I noticed that in embarking on this study, my expectations were in line with the literature, in that I expected participants to discuss symbolic meaning but was surprised when they emphasized the significance of the physical form. This indicates a continued bias amongst

researchers and theorists—myself included—against the physical in favor of the conceptual, even in the consideration of objects.

An important thing to note regarding the physical form of the objects in this study is that none of them were new. In fact, many were quite worn: the blanket that is now a tangle of yarn, the lion figurine that has been broken and glued back together several times, the fifty-dollar bill that one participant carried around for decades, the metal sculpture of flames that has been moved between five or six different homes. This is important in that it distinguishes these objects from public commodities, aligning them more with what Janet Hoskins (1998) has termed “biographical objects.” Whereas, Hoskins writes, the public commodity is “eternally youthful and not used up but replaced,” the biographical object “grows old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner” (p. 8). I discuss the concept of biographical object in more detail later in this chapter.

One thing that emerged somewhat subtly in the interviews was the suggestion that in some cases, people feel that certain objects *should* be special, but they don’t find them special. Sometimes this was expressed as relational—as when one participant discussed how she felt she should hold onto a platter from her paternal grandmother, but did not feel connected to the grandmother, nor to her father, and passed the platter on. Yet there was indication that the failure of some objects to become special is often connected to objects’ form: some participants discussed their decision to pass up certain heirlooms because they simply didn’t like the things as objects; there was some mention of gifts that failed to feel special because they were aesthetically unappealing; some talked about heirlooms that felt too large and cumbersome; and often, when participants talked about feeling “burdened” by a special object, it was because they felt they must hold onto it only to honor a relationship in which a special person loved the object,

not because they themselves found the objects appealing. It seems that more research could be done into objects that fail to become special.

Several participants spoke about the energetic properties of their objects, regarding particular special objects as conduits of positive energy. One participant talked about pouring spiritual energy into his prayer beads, and about feeling that the prayer beads in some way conducted that energy, and coming into contact with them again could put him back into a place of spiritual energy and focus. Another regarded her copy of the Fatiha in a similar fashion. A participant talked about feeling that his childhood blanket was “medicinal.” And another spoke about keeping objects from loved ones nearby when he underwent chemotherapy, because he feels that they carry positive energy, and can energetically put him in mind of those he loves. These beliefs support Paul Claudel’s (1965) assertion that “ordinary objects which have long been used by one master take on a sort of personality, their own force, I could almost say a soul, ...they owe their existence to people and, awakened by their contact, take on their own life and autonomous activities, a sort of latent and fantastic willfulness.”

These beliefs also resonate with Jane Bennett’s (2009) observation that “matter [is] vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluentscent”(p. 115). She argues in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009) that the Western concept of a sharp human/nature divide is a distortion of reality, and that it is more true to think of humans as “material configurations” like nonhumans (p. 112), and to think of physical matter as an actant like humans. She writes:

I am a material configuration, the pigeons in the park are material compositions, the viruses, parasites, and heavy metals in my flesh and in pigeon flesh are materialities, as are neurochemicals, hurricane winds, E. coli, and the dust on the floor.... nonhumans—



trash, stem cells, food, metal, technologies, weather—are actants more than objects.  
(2009, p. 112-115).

There are often physical exchanges between people and objects: when a participant smells his deceased father's keepsake box, for example, inhaling a scent “like a mixture of cedar and plain chapstick,” he is literally taking in chemicals from inside that box, and the connections between the olfactory system and the limbic system excite feelings and memories. It would be fascinating to know more about how other types of objects' physical properties—including their vibrations—affect us and act upon us.

Finally, some participant responses regarding form indicated that objects with faces might elicit different reactions than those without faces. A participant spoke of having some notion that her animal figurines—because they have faces—would be harder to get rid of because of a sense that it would hurt their feelings. It would be interesting for future research to consider differences between how people regard objects with faces and those without.

### **Meaning Within Function**

Participants saw their objects functioning in many ways, as indicated in how they described the objects, and in their descriptions of how they interact with their objects. At the risk of being redundant, I would like to list the objects' roles again: “comfort object” or “comforting” thing; “totem;” “emblem;” “charm;” “talisman;” promoter of “luck;” protective thing; conduit of positive energy; “access point” or “portal;” thing that connects to others and “keeps people close;” “time capsule;” “magical” thing; “transporting” thing; “prevent[er] of homesickness;” thing that helps bless ones endeavors; “love object;” “magnet” for positive energy; “guide;” thing that inspires wonder/awe; thing that connects one to the Divine; source of inspiration; stimulator of thoughts; companion; communication of one's identity; reminder of one's identity;

“symbol;” object that assists in bringing about sexual climax; “tool;” “burden” or “obligation;” “medicinal” thing; “supportive” thing; sign of one’s authority/adulthood; “part of me;” part of a ritual or prayer; part of a routine; thing for difficult times; thing for when one is especially missing the presence of another; thing for travel; souvenir; thing that helps one to understand another person; and “remnant.” Single objects were generally seen in more than one way, holding more than one function.

I found that these understandings fall naturally into rough clusters, and that the objects’ roles can be conceived broadly: as signifiers of affiliation or membership in a group; as things that assert and reify personal identity; as things that connect possessors’ to special people, places, and/or times; as things that connect them to something larger such as the Divine, “infinite consciousness,” or to a new perspective on humanity; as things that stimulate thought; as things that bring comfort and calm; as things that bring protection and/or luck, good energy and/or health. These are vital functions, responding to important needs. As such, they take on roles that are distinct from hobbyism, materialism, fetish, and also, I think, pathology (there certainly may be overlap, but the functions and meanings that emerged in my study cannot be clearly contained by any of these terms).

Many participants articulated that their special objects carry significance because they signify affiliation within a group or overlapping groups, asserting their possessor’s identity within larger wholes. A ring indicates that one is married and no longer a “man-child”, a hunting knife indicates that one is from the Upper Peninsula, Michigan, a piece of jewelry evidences that one is a serious anthropologist, and appreciation of a carved figure shows that one has a particular aesthetic.

Janet Hoskins (1998) asserted that in modern industrial societies, the objects we keep

close are largely public commodities. These, she states, have a globalized meaning instead of a localized, particular, individual meaning, they are replaced when they become worn, and do not contribute to one's identity in a meaningful way: "Consumers of public commodities are decentered and fragmented by their acquisition of things, and do not use them as part of a narrative process of self-definition" (p. 8). My findings indicate that in fact, American adults do relate to some objects in a way that is more biographical, to use Hoskins' term, than consumerist, for many special objects have localized and personal meaning and help shape an individual's sense of self throughout her life. The special objects discussed in this study were almost entirely biographical objects, though participants did make reference to their phones and computers as important devices. They are not generally conceived as something that can be replaced, and are held onto for life, sometimes becoming worn and tattered with use. Whereas public commodities fill in for a lack of identity, the biographical objects in my study seem to "reify characteristics of personhood that must then be narratively organized into an identity" (1998, p. 20). These objects assert one's identity—to oneself and others, and also enact it; they "independently confirm their owners' central narratives of personal identity" (Korn, 2013, p. 66). This function is distinct from consumerism.

One of the most consistent ways that participants responded to questions about object's significance is to state that their objects are special because they evoke special people (and/or places, events, time periods). The objects are often evocative because of their points of origin: they *came from* the people, places and times that they are reminiscent of, affirming Sherry Turkle's point that evocative objects "exert their holding power because of the particular moment and circumstance in which they come into the [possessor]'s life" (2007, p. 6). The objects in this study often acquired particular specialness because their ability to conjure up

people, places, or events is rare. As Peter Korn writes when considering one of his own meaningful objects: “there is only one such [embroidery hand-stitched by his grandmother] in the world, and the family history it confirms is highly perishable” (2013, p. 66).

This function calls to mind Claude Levi-Strauss’ (1966) notion that material objects are “good to think with.” Coming into contact with the object stimulates the mind and helps one to think in new ways and about new things. One might add that the objects are also good to *feel* with.

Many objects also connect their possessors to things that are larger than individual people, places and times: to “infinite consciousness,” the “Divine,” or to a view of the world “on a scale much larger than [one]self,” helping her to think about humanity from a greater remove than she normally does, and filling her with awe and wonder. To me, it seems that when objects evoke special people they help one to reach for the familiar, whereas when they evoke infinite consciousness or the Divine they are helping one to reach for the unfamiliar. However, it is possible that connecting with something larger than oneself in fact puts one in touch with a familiar feeling, akin to an early state of calm; we do not have enough information at this point to draw any conclusions, and future study is necessary. At any rate, objects that function to evoke these things are also “good to think with;” they turn the mind toward a new way of thinking.

The prayer beads, the photo of the guru, and the Fatiha also call to mind Levi-Strauss’ ideas on ritual (1966, p. 32):

Ritual... conjoins, for it brings about a union (one might even say communion in this context) or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the

faithful . . . there is an asymmetry that is postulated in advance between the profane and sacred, faithful and officiating, dead and living, initiated and uninitiated, etc., and the ‘game’ consists in making all the participants pass to the winning side by means of events.

To Levi-Strauss (1966) ritual—which often involves objects—brings about a merger, and this rings true to participants’ statement that they are “connected to” or “put in touch with” some greater thing. Again, it would be interesting to further consider how these rituals differ from and intersect with ritual use of objects to conjure special people, places and things; all of the overtly religious objects referred to in my study also hold relational meaning, conjuring the special people who share and encouraged participants’ ritualistic beliefs.

Several participants state that they find comfort in their objects. Often, this comfort is connected to the objects’ other functions, which speaks to the interrelatedness of many of these functions. When objects evoke particular persons, for example, they evoke relationships, and as such communicate affiliation and membership, as well as one’s identity within that relationship, as one who is loved, who is felt to belong, who belongs. Similarly, objects function in asserting identity and affiliation and evoking relationships and special places are, it seems, often connected to their function as a source of security and comfort. Alternately, objects’ comforting aspects sometimes come from their form: the smoothness of a rock, the softness of a blanket. It would be interesting to further pursue whether and how these two aspects of the object—physical comfort and emotional comfort—connect.

Many participants alluded to object functions that one could, I would argue, fairly describe as a certain *je ne sais quois*; these functions hail to something mysterious and unknown, at the edge of our language and shared sociocultural understandings. Three

participants spoke of their objects' energetic quality, and their ability to actively refocus the participants' mind, changing the way they think and feel: through the energy of the object, one states, he is able to step closer to "infinite consciousness;" another uses a printed prayer to—energetically—move toward the "Divine;" a third speaks of how the energy of special objects puts him in mind of those he loves, making him feel healed. Another spoke of the "magic" of her object, and several alluded to a feeling that their objects protect them. And several participants spoke of the way they can "feel [their objects] in their heart." These understandings suggest that the speakers are coming from different religious and spiritual backgrounds, using the language of their local communities. It is also unclear, at this point, whether these functions happen on a physical plane or a conceptual plane, or both. The overall message, however, seems shared; the objects have a mysterious and profound way of transforming the way one is feeling and thinking. In other words, there is a felt effect, and how the effect comes about is not wholly clear.

These understandings put me in mind of another part of Peter Korn's text, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters*. Korn writes that (2013, p. 59):

The physical details of the desk speak to a more ancient materialism, deep in the human psyche. This is the belief that objects have mana: that the miraculous power to provide spiritual sustenance resides in the object itself, not in the achievement of ownership. We enshrine the original manuscript of the Declaration of Independence because it has mana; we revere hallowed paintings in museums because they have mana; we make pilgrimages to the Shroud of Turin because it has mana.

*Mana*: a pervasive supernatural or magical power. Korn's (2013) writing speaks to the mystery around some objects' power and allure, and to the fact that that power and allure is *felt* rather than articulated.

Participants' suggestion that they feel protected by objects—that a special bracelet may help one to do well in interviews, that written prayers might bring protection during travels, that a charm might help one to overcome car trouble—call to mind Watt and Wiseman's (2004) study, "Measuring Superstitious Belief: Why Lucky Charms Matter." Watt and Wiseman (2004) found that positive superstitious beliefs, such as the possession of a lucky charm, are correlated with life satisfaction. Though previous studies have suggested that superstition is associated with poor psychosocial adjustment, low self-efficacy, and high trait anxiety, this study shows that positive beliefs—the idea that one can positive effect the future with a superstitious behavior—is not associated with these things at all. Given this understanding, it is likely that the participants in this study who feel that their objects bring protection and luck, and even healing and beneficial magic, could actually be benefited by these feelings. This is quite different than an assumption that object use is pathological.

### **Negative Meanings**

The findings indicate that adults' special objects sometimes have negative associations. Some become, at times, sources of anxiety, or regret and sadness, or longing, or guilt, or shame. Some objects feel, at times, like a burden or obligation. Interestingly, sometimes people felt guilt, in particular, toward the object, when they felt an inclination to treat it poorly: for example, one participant voiced guilt around a desire to get rid of her animal figurines, and another feels guilt when she desires to travel without her blanket. Shame seemed spurred, most clearly, through a sense that they should not have these objects—particularly in the case of soft objects like a teddy bear—but also through an idea that they should not have so *many* special objects. Participants felt many things toward these objects, but shame entered into the mix, and indicates an awareness of social constructs of normalcy, and health, for as Cozolino (2006) has written,

shame is the “visceral experience of being shunned and expelled from social connectedness” (p. 230). This begs the question, again: how are social constructs of normalcy and clinical concepts of health related? What is the difference between aberrant and pathological object use? Is object use aberrant?

### **Winnicott**

My findings culminate in implications for Winnicott’s assertions on object attachment in adulthood. They suggest that adults can find intense experience, meaning and warmth through the use of objects.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which objects in my study are transitional objects. Winnicott implied that transitional objects must be soft. If that is a requirement, then five objects in this study qualify. He stated that they are created in infancy. Given that requirement, three objects in this study qualify. He stated that they are cuddled in times of anxiety and loneliness. With that restriction, only one object in this study qualifies. The participant who possesses this one object—the remnants of a blanket, called Blankie—was swaddled in it when she was born and has been attached to it ever since. She craves him more intensely in moments of loneliness, and uses him to feel calm and “filled.” She also articulates that Blankie initially functioned as a substitute for the caregiver.

Yet, one could argue that most—if not all—of the objects my participants discussed function like transitional objects: they are chosen (in a sense created), one could argue, by the possessors, perhaps as they begin to recognize and accept specific realities (such as the departure of a particular person, time or event, or the fact that they cannot, themselves, reside perpetually in a state of spiritual transcendence); they acquire a vital importance; one could argue that they prolong and maintain the state of illusion, making it possible for “separation to be not-quite-



separation” (Turkle, 2007, p. 314); they are seen to give comfort, warmth, positive energy, and/or to have a physical characteristic or do something that seems to show they have vitality; they stand in for the no-longer-present loved one/thing/time/experience, supplying protection, safety, and comfort when these things are not available; they are not wholly illusory nor wholly a party of external reality; they give meaning and continuity to life. This argument is contingent upon the idea that special people and places and things and transcendent experiences function in similar ways as good-enough caregivers, creating a space of pleasurable illusion. More research is necessary to ascertain this, but it seems plausible.

Winnicott himself noted that infants’ transitional objects, while mostly soft, can also be hard, and he also suggested that older children switch over to hard objects. This raises questions about whether transitional objects need be soft, or need be cuddled; in fact, it suggests that they need not be.

Importantly, Winnicott also emphasized that reality acceptance is never fully achieved, and that individuals go back and forth between illusion, transitional/intermediate space, and disillusion throughout their lives. With that in mind, it is quite possible that special objects continue to have close ties to transitional space throughout life. As Grolnick and Lengyel (1978) emphasized, building on Winnicott, life is a continual back and forth between illusion, disillusion, and an intermediate—that is, transitional—space. My participants’ suggestion that they use objects more intensely in difficult and/or precarious times supports the notion that special objects might be more acutely meaningful within transition. Perhaps people are not ever done with the need for transitional objects.

I strategically did not attempt to assess participants’ characterological traits or psychological health in this study. For one thing, this study is premised upon the idea that object

use in adulthood is not, *per se*, indicative of pathology, for this is a theoretical *fait accompli* and has not been sufficiently demonstrated. Questions regarding participant mental health might likely have interfered with the goal of obtaining intimate information regarding participants' object use—as it might likely imply that the researcher did, in fact, connect object use to pathology, and thus suggest that participant responses might be judged or even condemned. My findings, importantly, shine light on what emerges when pathology is not taken as a given.

That said, my findings contribute to the conversation about objects and pathology, in that readers will likely find that participant responses are familiar—and resonate with—experiences from their own lives. This familiarity may likely alter whether readers consider object attachment, *per se*, to be aberrant.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Research**

The major strength of this study is that it provides a glimpse of adults' direct experience with and understanding of special objects. This adds an important perspective to a conversation about object attachment and object use.

As in any study, individual participants' perceptions of the interviewer impact their responses and behavior within the interview. Of particular importance is the fact that this interviewer is biased toward an acceptance of object attachment in adulthood, whereas other researchers may be biased toward an understanding of adult's attachment to objects as in some way pathological. Because of the interviewer's stance, participants might be more likely to share personal information about their special objects, adding greater nuance to our understandings of object use in adulthood.

This study was focused on gathering information about the meaning and function of objects for participants, and was premised upon the idea that object use in adulthood is not, in

and of itself, indicative of pathology. Thus, the researcher did not gather information on participants' psychological health. The study also did not look at participants' overall satisfaction with their life. Future studies could benefit from more directly assessing life satisfaction, and/or psychological makeup, and the connection to object use. Watt and Wiseman's study on lucky charms could potentially intersect with Greenson's belief that neurotic person's objects are felt to be positive and psychotic person's objects are negative. In addition, future study might consider the difference between different types of object use, and consider when and how object use is healthy and when it is not healthy.

### **Implications for Social Work**

This study reminds us that object use in adulthood has never been conclusively linked to pathology. In fact, it indicates that special objects often play important and meaningful roles within adults' lives, sometimes even, perhaps, promoting mental health. Social workers are ethically bound to treat humans justly and with dignity, and the premature pathologizing of object use in adulthood goes against the ethics of our field. Thus, this study reminds social workers to guard against theoretical *fait accompli* that encourage pathologizing treatment of others, and to guard against reflexively connecting social constructions of normative behavior to clinical ideas of psychological health.

In addition, this study's findings could be helpful in guiding clinical practice. Discussion about special objects is often, it seems, a way to access deeply held personal beliefs. It can also inform a clinician about clients' ability to self-soothe through object use. It may likely be that helping clients to be more consciously aware of their relationships with special objects could increase their ability to access positive emotions such as pride, calm, connectedness, affiliation, love, and loving.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that meaning, warmth, and intense experience can be felt in adulthood through contact with individual objects. American adults relationships with their special objects are multi-faceted; objects are often seen to perform a range of functions—largely positive, though sometime negative, and to evoke a range of feelings and thoughts from their possessors. The findings have implications for D.W. Winnicott’s concept of transitional object; they suggest that humans may never grow out of their need for such objects, though the particular form of their objects is likely to change after infancy; and they suggest that we consider whether a larger range of experiences can feel and function like a relationship with a good-enough mother. I look forward to future research and theorizing on this subject.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

For the past seven years, I have been asking adults about the objects that they keep close. People have talked about a wide range of objects that hold a wide range of meanings. I am interested in the ways that objects hold meaning for individuals. I have narrowed the focus of this particular project to the objects significant to American adults.

1. Do you have any objects that you consider special?
2. What is the object?
3. What makes it special?
4. Where—and/or from whom—did you get it?
5. If purchased or found, what inspired the purchase or selection? If gifted to you, what occasioned the giving? Did the giver tell you anything about the object?
6. When did this object become yours?
7. Does it remind you of a particular person/place/thing/event? Please specify.
8. Does the object have a practical function?
9. Do you interact with the object... use it, clean it, look at it, talk to it? Please specify.
10. Do you keep it in a specific spot?
11. Has its meaning or role in your life changed over time? If so, do you have any guess why?
12. Was there a time when you used it more, or in a particularly unique way? If so, when and why?
13. Could you imagine losing it? What would that be like?
14. Would you bequeath it to someone? What type of person? When? And what might you tell the person about the object's significance?
15. What kind of person has an object like this? Or, do you think possessing this particular object says anything about you as a person?
16. Would you be able to recognize your object in a line-up of similar objects? If so, how?
17. As we have talked, have any other objects occurred to you?

18. Did you have a special object as a child? Please specify.

19. Does your current object hold positive or negative associations (or both)?

20. Are you currently in a transition? Please describe the transition. Are you at the beginning, middle, or end? How do you feel about the transition? Is it positive, negative, or neutral?

#### Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What is your race?
5. What is your religion/spiritual affiliation, if any?
6. How long have you been an American citizen?

**Appendix B**  
**Recruitment Letter**

Hello,

My name is Emily Walsh and I am a student at the Smith College School for Social Work. For my thesis, I am reaching out to individuals 18 or older who would be willing to participate in this study. My goal is to better understand the role of meaningful objects in the lives of adults: the types of objects that adults consider special, as well as the ascribed meaning and function of those objects. Information on this subject will be gathered through brief interviews, either in person, over the telephone, over skype, or in writing.

This study is confidential and participation is voluntary. The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations. The interview should take you 30-45 minutes and is entirely voluntary. You may decide to stop participating at any time.

In addition, I would very much appreciate your help in recruiting others for this survey. If you feel comfortable, please forward this email to those you know who may meet the criteria for my survey—i.e. are 18 years or older and an American citizen.

Feel free to contact me with concerns or questions.

Thank you for your time,  
Emily Walsh  
Smith College School for Social Work '14  
ewalsh@smith.edu  
XXX-XXX-XXXX

**Appendix C**  
**Informed Consent**



Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

.....

Title of Study: A Study of Object Use: Transitional Objects, Adults, and Contemporary American Culture

Investigator(s): Emily Walsh, Smith College School of Social Work, XXX-XXX-XXXX

.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study about objects meaningful to adults.
- You were selected as a participant because you are 18 years of age or older and an American citizen.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding about objects that hold meaning for American adults.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: participate in a 30-45 minute interview, either in person, over the telephone, over skype, or in writing.

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks.

**Benefits of Being in the Study**

- The benefits of participation are a deepened understanding of the role objects play in your life and potentially an enhanced sense of connection.
- The benefits to social work/society are: a deepened understanding of the way adults make

meaning, and of the ways they psychologically equip themselves in times of stress and change.

#### Confidentiality

- This study is confidential. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
- Your participation will be kept confidential. Interviews will be arranged via private communication—email or telephone call—with the researcher. Audio recordings will be made, but will be listened to only by the researcher. After being transcribed, with no identifying information, recordings will be erased by the researcher. Written interviews will be stored in encrypted locations.
- No personal identifiers will be used in any of the data analysis or report writing.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

#### Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

#### Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by March 1, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis.

#### Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Emily Walsh, at ewalsh@smith.edu or by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

#### Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

I agree to be [audio] taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D**  
**Human Subjects Review Approval Letter**



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 27, 2014

Emily Walsh

Dear Emily,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor

**Appendix E**  
**Human Subjects Review Amendment Approval Letter**



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School for Social Work  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 11, 2014

Emily Walsh

Dear Emily,

I have reviewed your amendments and they look fine. The amendments to your study are therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,



Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor