

On Meaning and Possessions

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## Abstract

This paper looks at two different types of meaning: the positive psychological construct of meaning in life and the meaning of possessions. Meaning in life promotes subjective wellbeing. A review of meaning of possessions literature reveals motifs and themes intersecting with sources of meaning in life. Ways to apply this in positive psychology are explored. Possessions are possible tools to enhance and elicit meaning in life. Given the rising need in non-clinical populations to declutter, meaning in life can help possession disposition.

The paper discusses limitations of the literature and makes observations about this predominating in consumer research rather than psychology.

## Aims/objectives

The paper asks:

- How does the literature on meaning of possessions inform the positive psychological construct of meaning in life?
- Can meaning in life help identify meaning of possessions? How can this benefit non-clinical populations?

## Structure

Definitions are presented of meaning in life, possessions and meaning of possessions. After a brief history, the meaning of possessions literature is reviewed under sub-headings of extended-self, contagion and anthropomorphism; categorisation of possessions; the relationship between meaning in life and meaning of possessions and how each informs the other. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings.

## Definitions

Positive psychology is still debating a coherent definition of *meaning in life*. Steger, et al. (2013) provide a summary of definitions. Happiness, achievement, intimacy, relationship, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, and fairness are listed as sources of meaning (Wong, 2011,

p.73). Three recent proposals categorise meaning under the following sub-headings:

- Belonging, purpose, story-telling, transcendence (Esfahani-Smith, 2017)
- Coherence, purpose, significance (Martela & Steger, 2016)
- Purpose, understanding, responsible action, enjoyment and evaluation (Wong, 2011)

Stemming from the work of Frankl (2004, originally published 1946), it's agreed that the definition being examined is meaning *in* not *of* life; that this is personal to each individual and changes over time (Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2016; King, 2016; Wong, 2009). The feature of connectedness with others will radiate consistently throughout this paper (Seligman, 2011; Wong, 2009;). This [short film on the Ikigai concept](#) illustrates that connectedness beautifully. Ikigai is Japanese for "*life worth living*" (Sone, et al., 2008, p.709) and correlates positively with a longer life.

Research tells us that greater meaning in life correlates with a range of wellbeing variables including hope, resilience, joy and love (Ivtzan, et al., 2016).

Possessions are defined as "item(s) of property, something belonging to one" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). It is hard to argue that anyone is without possessions – even Gandhi had some.



Consumer psychology provides a definition of meaning of possessions saying possessions are "commodity object(s)"

with objective, commonly held meanings as well as subjective ones held by the owner (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, p.813). Participants in the studies reviewed below comprehended with ease what's meant by meaningful possessions. Winterich, Reczek and Irwin (2017) go as far as substituting their word "sentimental" with "meaningful", inferring that it would be better understood.

## Brief history

Outside the debate on materialism's inverse correlation with wellbeing (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Pham, 2015; Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2015) alongside questions of whether experiences are more meaningful than material possessions (Pandelaere, 2016; Wallman, 2015), recent literature on the meaning of possessions is relatively sparse. It predominates mostly in the fields of consumerism and marketing. It's worth noting two pieces of work from the 1980s before reviewing it.

Psychologists Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), conducted an intensive study with Chicago families exploring which possessions are most meaningful and why. They describe possessions as vessels of personal histories, positing the notion of "*psychic energy*" (p.184) flowing from owner to possession to next owner.

Russell Belk, [a marketing professor](#) whose life's work is the meaning of possessions, introduced the conceptual framework of possessions being extensions of ourselves (Belk, 1988). His work is now referred to as seminal (Jarrett, 2013; Ladik, Carrillat, & Tadajewski, 2015). He examines meaning of possessions from a range of perspectives including gifts, loss, collections and memories, concluding that "*we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions*" (Belk, 1988, p.160).

## Extended-self, contagion and anthropomorphism

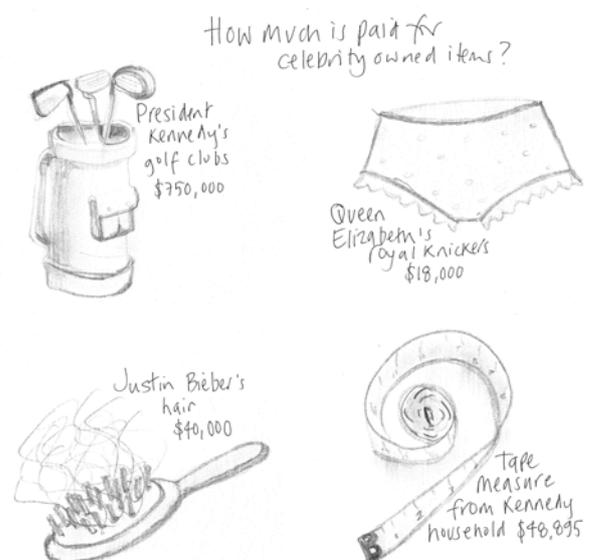
Ahuvia (2005), in a consumer journal, notices Belk's (1988) potential contribution to positive psychology in terms of the significance of the intersection between meaning of possessions and meaning in life.

**"Belk (1988) anticipates the interest in positive psychology by calling our attention to the fact that the "possessions incorporated in extended-self serve valuable functions to healthy personalities" (159) because "possessions can make a positive contribution to our identities" (160)."**

(Ahuvia, 2005, p.183)

Work on endowment tells us that once a possession is owned, even briefly, it's ascribed more value than its monetary or utilitarian worth. This is attributed to the extended-self concept (Dommer & Swaminathan, 2013). A frequently occurring motif in the literature of "*sympathetic magic (contagion)*" (Belk, 1988, p.149) may assist an understanding of how and why meaning is attributed to possessions and how that could inform the intersection with meaning in life.

Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom (2010) present a contagion model explaining the vast amounts spent on celebrity owned items. In hypothetical scenarios, participants are less likely to buy a celebrity owned item if it were sterilised first. Their desire to buy celebrity owned possessions was unaffected by the restriction of not being allowed to sell them on. It's concluded that the attraction is not financial investment, but a desire to be contaminated by the essence of the original celebrity owner.



Sources: Bloom & Gelman, 2008;  
<https://twentytwoords.com/celebrity-items-bought-on-ebay/2/>

This notion of possessions being contaminated by their owners begins early. Children are more likely to wear shirts that belonged to 'good' children than 'bad' ones, the assumption being that goodness or badness is contagious (Diesendruck & Perez, 2015). In the same (hypothetical) study children's reluctance to give away a treasured shirt was reduced if it was cleansed "*of all the little pieces of you*" (Diesendruck & Perez, 2015, p.15).

Hood and Bloom's (2008) participants went through a non-hypothetical, lived experience. Children witnessed an illusory duplicating machine reproduce an object. Afterwards, they were offered the opportunity to duplicate one of their own possessions. Half the children brought 'transitional objects' like blankets that offer comfort and safety in their transition to independence from caregivers (Winnicott, 1953). A fifth of those children became distressed, refusing to allow duplication of their possessions. Most of the others declined to accept their 'duplicate', desiring to keep their original. When asked why they explained "*because it's mine*" (Hood & Bloom, 2008, p.459).

Contagion and magic flow through the literature as people tell of the comfort of wearing their father's old cardigan (Tatzel, 2014), the good luck garments worn when taking exams (Dyl & Wapner, 1996), a rosary that's meaningful because of who gifted it (Hill, 1991). This flow is continually reinforced by participants maintaining that their meaningful possessions cannot be replaced with seemingly identical replicas; that the essence of that possession's meaning would be lost (Grayson & Shulman, 2000). Significance, belonging, relationships and connectedness, all elements of meaning in life (Esfahani-Smith, 2017; Martela & Steger, 2016; Seligman, 2011) resonate.

An inversion of possessions embodying the spirit of the owner occurs when possessions are anthropomorphised. Tendencies are witnessed among the lonely to assign human characteristics to inanimate objects, providing their owners with connectedness and belonging (Lastovicka & Anderson, 2014; Chen, Sengupta & Adaval, 2018). It's hard not to recall a marooned Tom Hanks creating a soul-mate, Wilson, from a volley ball (Zemeckis, Cast away (Motion picture: 2000)). In the search to understand what meaning is attributed to possessions,

asking what human characteristics the owner ascribes to them produces illuminating results (Ahuvia, 2005).



### **Categorising**

For positive psychology to adapt and learn from the meaning of possessions literature, categories of possessions to study and explore are useful. Two studies, one from business, the other from psychology, use phenomenological interviews resulting in different ways of categorising. For simplicity and comparison, they are presented in tables 1 and 2. Both tables echo words included in sources of meaning (Wong, 2011), recalling the meaning in life definitions above.

| Category of possession  | Explanation   | Participants' quotes  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Affiliation-linked</b>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• associated with relationships</li> <li>• evidence of fear of loss which will lose the affiliation</li> <li>• often kept safe even when broken</li> </ul>   | <i>"It symbolizes my relationship with her"</i>   |
| <b>Differentiation-linked</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• acquired to make us stand out/give autonomy (cars, clothes)</li> <li>• attached meaning declines over time, possibly as meaning in life changes</li> </ul> | <i>"Clothes are special to me in the beginning ... After a while they don't make any particular impression on me"</i> |
| <b>Recreation, security, nurturance and transition-linked</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• symbolising specific life events/authentic ways of being</li> <li>• highly valued and meaningful</li> </ul>  | <i>"My wedding ring symbolizes our marriage, our life vows, our love"</i>   |

Table 1. Categories of possessions: Karanika and Hogg (2013)

| Category of possession                | Explanation  | Participants' quotes   |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Nurturing Self</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make us feel better;</li> <li>• 'talismans' (p.1568).</li> </ul>  | <i>"honoring their value to me is a way of honoring my own growth and my own self"</i>   |
| <b>Connecting with others</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reminders of important relationships with individuals/groups</li> </ul>   | <i>"This is one way of creating roots, not with my own life, but at least with a larger family of humanity"</i>                    |
| <b>Affirming personal experience</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• symbols of achievement in life/work</li> </ul>  | <i>"an affirmation of my belief that I am intelligent enough to be able to do it"</i>  |
| <b>Supporting self through change</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• similar to transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953).</li> <li>• reminders of personal strengths and abilities.</li> </ul> | <i>"it's like a power, ... an internal sense of warmth and strength that comes from it"</i>  |
| <b>Cultivating a sense of self</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• symbols of personal identity</li> </ul>   | <i>"it's just a piece of jewelry; however, what it symbolizes in friendship for me is a lifetime of, ... treating people well"</i> |

Table 2. Categories of possessions: Martin (2017)

## How can meaning of possessions inform meaning in life?

***"Life stories provide special possessions with meaning, and special possessions revitalize older consumers' life stories."***

(Price, Arnould, & Folkman-Curasi, 2000, p.187)

To date no PPIs (positive psychology interventions) have been empirically tested to increase meaning in life (King, 2016). An unvalidated pilot intervention established increased meaning in life and other wellbeing factors. Participants photographed "*things that make your life feel meaningful*" (Steger, Shim, Barenz & Shin, 2014, p.28), then wrote about the photographs' meaning a week later. Possessions featured strongly in the photographs, suggesting they could be useful tools to identify and increase meaning in life.

King (2016) suggests other adaptations of this study including explaining meaningful photographs to trusted friends. Price, et al. (2000) coached undergraduates to interview family members about their possessions and noted feedback of how mutually enriching that experience was.

Interviewing and conversational methodologies predominate in the meaning of possessions literature. Owners tell stories of their possessions and their meaning is extracted (e.g. Price et al., 2000; Martin, 2017). Narrative therapy and storytelling can help gain coherence and promote meaning (Adler, Wagner & McAdams, 2007; Vogel, 2012). Interviewing people about possessions displayed on their mantelpieces, Hurdley (2006) emphasises the benefits of being in participants' homes with the possessions in context. She also notes that this process is an interaction, hinting that different researchers might elicit different stories. Nevertheless, it's evident that these interactions are enjoyable, insightful and promote rapport. Using possessions as tools to discuss meaning in life could be used to build therapeutic relationships (Martin, 2017). Rapport is considered one of the key elements of successful coaching (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2014).

***"...the practice of producing narratives around objects contributes to the personal work of autobiography and renders objects as meaningful participants in the social work of identity-building"***

(Hurdley, 2006, p.718)

## How can meaning in life inform meaning of possessions?

People with clinical hoarding disorder and minimalists represent two ends of the spectrum of possession ownership. Clinical hoarding is the behaviour of compulsively acquiring and keeping possessions such that homes become stuffed full and the homeowner is stressed or functionally impaired (Holmes, Whomsley, & Kellett, 2015). Minimalism is a deliberate choice to live with fewer possessions (Dopierala, 2017).

Frost and Steketee (2010) attribute misaligned meaning and attachment placed on all possessions by people with clinical hoarding disorder. The letting go of *any* possession can be experienced as traumatic.

In non-clinical populations, growing attention is being paid to decluttering; the process of culling possessions no longer needed. Katherine Blackler, president of the Association of Professional Declutterers and Organisers states the association's UK membership has tripled since 2013. "*There's a massive demand for our work from people overwhelmed by their stuff*" (K. Blackler, personal communication, November 14th, 2018). An Amazon UK search (3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018) of the word 'declutter' revealed over 4,000 publications. Marie Kondo claims to have sold [over 5 million books](#) worldwide. Perhaps her success can be attributed to her invitation to ask if a possession "*sparks joy*" (Kondo, 2014, p.47) – whether or not it is meaningful.

The dark – and light – sides of meaning in life proposed by second wave positive psychology may inform meaning of possessions. Sources of meaning can be negatively valenced such as trauma or sadness (Lomas & Ivztan, 2016). We know that meaning in life changes over a life-span (Steger, 2009) and that when behaviour is misaligned with meaning, authenticity is challenged, leading to crisis

(Ivtzan, et al., 2016). The literature on disposition of possessions is helpful here.

There's focus in the disposition literature on older populations who may be downsizing or preparing their wills. Price, et al. (2000) summarise research up to 2000 on events leading to disposition, emotions involved, meanings associated with possessions, goals of disposition and disposition strategy. Although dated, like the categories of meaning ascribed to possessions by Karankia and Hogg (2013) and Martin (2017), their summary is peppered with words associated with sources of meaning (Appendix A).

When current meaning in life is misaligned with the meaning of possessions, those possessions can become burdensome (Masset & Decrop, 2016; Ahuvia, 2005). To let the possessions go can be a relief, or it can be challenging if the owner holds on to past meaning in life, believing that through disposal they would lose their sense of self. This can be more marked when there is no control over who owns the possession next, like charitable donations. Echoing the contagion studies mentioned earlier, rituals to neutralise or sterilise the possessions' meaning can help. Similarly, "*iconic transfer*", the act of photographing the possession, moves its meaning into the photograph, making disposition easier (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, p.817).

Echoes of the contagion studies referred to earlier arise again when we see how joyfully and willingly people donate their treasured possessions confident that future owners will value their history. A retired master printer who has steadfastly hung on to the tools he no longer needs experiences one of those magical moments of shared passion on meeting a printing apprentice. He insists the apprentice keep the tools, wanting nothing material in return (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005).

## Conclusion

This paper asks how meaning in life can inform meaning of possessions and vice versa. Recent meaning of possessions literature – much taken from consumer journals - has been reviewed. The paper has explored the extended-self, contagion, anthropomorphism, categorisation of possession meaning, ways that possessions can be used as

tools to promote meaning in life and ways meaning in life can inform possession disposition. The application of these concepts is relevant to the wellbeing benefits of increased meaning in life and a rise in the need to declutter. Further investigation of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's (1981) existing work classifying meanings, possessions, gender, age and class alongside the possession meaning categories proposed by Karankia and Hogg (2013) and Martin (2017) will be a valuable contribution to applying this work.

There are limitations in the studies reviewed. Many participants were women and there is a call to use interview methodologies to increase cross-cultural understanding (Martin, 2017). The preparedness of participants in the photographic studies (Steger et al., 2013, Steger, et al., 2014) contrasted with the spontaneity of interviews in people's homes (Karanika & Hogg, 2013) is difficult to compare.

There is lack of data on possessions with negative meaning valences. Ahuvia's (2005) questions about neutral meaning possessions elicit responses that help identify tensions in participants' self-identities. For possessions to be used as tools in meaning PPIs it will be important to include those with positive, negative and neutral meaning valence.

It's safe to assume the consumer contribution to the meaning of possessions literature has an inherent motive to promote the acquisition, consumption and disposal of possessions. Consumer psychology is defined as '*examining consumer preferences... to help advertising and marketing*' (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). Mittal and Silvera (2018) acknowledge this. However, what emerges is the contribution meaningful possessions can make as tools to promote meaning in life and subject matter to promote rapport in coaching and therapy.



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