



Published in final edited form as:

Ageing Soc. 2012 July 1; 32(5): 833–850. doi:10.1017/S0144686X11000705.

Safe passage of goods and self during residential relocation in later life

DAVID J. EKERDT*, MARK LUBORSKY†, and CATHERINE LYSACK†

*Gerontology Center, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

†Institute of Gerontology, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

Abstract

Techniques of possession research among older people tend to accentuate their prizing of things and their use of special dispositions to achieve the protection or ‘safe passage’ of things as they transfer to a new owner. Such efforts on behalf of possessions may also be undertaken to perpetuate the self. To study the care of things and self in a wider context, we examined older people’s repertoire of disposition strategies during episodes of household relocation and downsizing. We analysed the narratives of persons in 75 households in the Midwestern United States of America. People indeed told stories about the safe passage of cherished possessions – their initiative to place things, appreciation by new owners, and attempts to project the values or memory of the giver. Such accounts of special placements, however, dotted rather than dominated recollections of the move. More commonly, large quantities of items were passed via non-specific offers of possessions to others who may volunteer to take them. This allowed people to nonetheless express satisfaction that their possessions had found appreciative owners. Even though our interviews did not disclose extensive attempts at self-transmission, whole-house downsizing may affirm the self in another way: as conscientious about the care of things. Such affirmation of the present self as accomplished and responsible can be seen as a positive adaptation to the narrowing life world.

Keywords

gifts; legacy; later life; possessions; residential relocation; self

Introduction

The literature’s dominant observation about older people and their possessions is that they place increasing value on the symbolic properties of their things. And so, when disposing of possessions, they make efforts to protect, conserve, and project these meanings. This conclusion proceeds largely from studies of cherished possessions – how they are kept and disposed. Approaching the question of possession management in later life from another direction, we feel that a rounder view is necessary, both about the care that older people take with things and what that says about the self.

Special, thoughtful, intentional placings of possessions with others have often been observed in consumption studies. This activity, we think, is aptly named by Roster’s (2001) term ‘safe passage’. Safe passage enunciates a goal for special dispositions, specifically the protection

of the thing's physical and symbolic properties as it transfers to a new owner. In her study of adults, Roster's informants suggested certain strategies to accomplish safe passage, such as high price-barriers at sales to make sure that the item finds an appreciative buyer, and the exchange of stories by giver and receiver (or seller and buyer), one telling the object's history and the other relaying plans for the thing. When the new owner appears to appreciate the value and significance of the thing, safe passage seems assured.

The strategies noted by Roster (2001) are but two of a wider repertoire of safe-passage methods that people use to protect their belongings as they give, sell or donate them. For example, Herrmann (1997) saw people selectively *lower* prices at garage sales to entice the right buyer to adopt the treasure. At sales observed by Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005), sellers sometimes sought buyers with a congruity of values. Selling, however, is a minor placement strategy compared to gift giving. In their very thorough discussion of special dispositions, Price, Arnould and Curasi (2000) describe a complex, tactical decision process for gifts of cherished possessions that must address interlocking questions about the who, when and how of such transfers. However resolved, storytelling on behalf of possessions commonly conveys their histories. When passing cherished objects, Marx, Solomon and Miller (2004) see the essential problem as one of securing a value match between giver and receiver (or buyer). Givers even steer things away from logical recipients if they fear the things will not be valued. Balancing the protection of the object with feelings of fairness among the potential recipients can also be tricky (Stum 1999). In all, giving things 'a good home' takes effort.

Older people have received considerable attention in research on cherished possessions and their disposition. The safe passage of possessions in later life is accentuated by two contexts: liminality and legacy. As summarised by Price, Arnould and Curasi (2000: 196): 'Among our older informants, disposition decisions are creative acts inspired both by a confrontation with biological finitude and the associated possibilities for metaphorical extension of the self in time'.

Liminality (threshold-crossing) is the personal passage between the third age of active retirement and the fourth age of increased vulnerability and a reduced life world (Weiss and Bass 2002). Liminality brings a gathering awareness of shorter time horizons for accomplishing personal goals (Carstensen 2006; Marshall 1975). This attention to time-left, as it affects possessions, may be borne in by personal losses (Morris 1992) or a developmental process of life review (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). The ability to manage one's material convoy now comes into question (Smith and Ekerdt 2011). If there are items that need safe passage to new holders, deferring the transfer to 'someday' or 'eventually' is a diminishing option. The protection of inalienable 'family things' – heirlooms of which elders are caretakers – becomes especially urgent (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004). Of course, people can make a will and guarantee ownership by some heir, but many cherished possessions do not rise to the level of titled property (Stum 2000). In addition, bequests lack the exchange rituals (McCracken 1988) and the storytelling that seem integral to safe passage.

Legacy of self is a second possible context of safe passage in later life. The literature on possessions is rife with references to the self. Such usage is generally consistent with Gubrium and Holstein's (2000: 100–1) conception of a personal self as 'the primary lived entity we comprehend ourselves as being as we go about everyday life' and that 'unfolds in and through social life'. There are many resources for self-construction (Callero 2003) and these include possessions, which people can come to regard as parts of themselves (Belk 1988). Because the self – the sense of who I really am – can be linked with possessions

(Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) and because time-left is uncertain, safe passage may acquire a motive beyond the physical protection of the object.

Cherished possessions can be deployed in an attempt to transcend mortality, placing them with legatees in order to reproduce, ancestralise, memorialise and donate the self (Marcoux 2001; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000; Unruh 1983). 'Gift wrapping ourselves' (Marx, Solomon and Miller 2004) may likewise be a developmental imperative (Hunter and Rowles 2005). Using intentional gifts to control how one is remembered is not only a matter of self-transmission but also an attempt to perhaps shape ideas about gender (Marcoux 2001) or family (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004). Whether such outcomes eventually occur is a gamble. During special dispositions, the object of course moves spatially, but these legacy-of-self sequelae are all imaginative. The fragility of special giving activities is commonly noted by researchers who typically report instances of gift refusals (Marx, Solomon and Miller 2004) with the associated prospect of the 'death of the thing' (Marcoux 2001). Safe passage, thus, can be a project on behalf of the self as well as the object.

Liminality and the imperative toward legacy, not to mention the longer accumulation of possessions, may indeed create a greater density of special dispositions by older people. In any event, later life has proven to be a rich field for research on this topic, so much so that studies of special dispositions, along with other research on the meaning of possessions (*e.g.* Kamptner 1989; Kroger and Adair 2008), leave an impression that older people have a heightened attachment to things. Their households are stocked with accumulated symbols of their lives, achievements, loved ones and ancestors – the objects becoming a 'kind of archive of personal history' (McCracken 1987). With increasing age, people cling to the comforting continuity of these material memories or else try to press them on others.

This impression in the literature stems from a research technique that is commonly employed to disclose possession meaning and management. The items in any modern household are nearly innumerable (Gosling *et al.* 2005), and so, in order to make possession research tractable, investigators commonly ask people to identify and discuss their most cherished, special or important things. For example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 56) asked an all-ages sample, 'What are the things in your home which are special to you?', and then probed to determine why the object was special, what it would mean to be without it, where it was kept and how it was acquired. In the genre of studies of later life, Morris (1992: 82) asked women 'to identify the personal possessions that she cherished very much or that had a great deal of meaning'. The opening questions by Price, Arnould and Curasi (2000: 198) were: 'What possessions do you value most? That is, which possessions are special or important to you?' And Marx, Solomon and Miller (2004: 276) motivated conversation with: 'What possessions do you value most. Why are they special to you?' This is a productive gambit that yields the stories behind selected things and also discloses aspects of elders' values, identities and significant relationships. Having specifically asked about special things, investigators reap content about the special-ness of things or their special disposition. The symbolic features of selected possessions come to the fore while the everyday utility of other household contents (or their inutility) is eclipsed. Thus, techniques of possession research among older adults tend to accentuate the prizing and preciousness of things.

The protection of things and the projection of self are valid ways to characterise possession management and disposition in later life. But is this characterisation sufficient? When older people place things with others, do they commonly do so with the objective of insuring safe passage? We turn, therefore, to investigate older people's repertoire of interpersonal disposition strategies during episodes that are dense with decision-making about possessions.

We study a circumstance that almost always makes the divestment of possessions exigent: residential relocation in later life. In the United States of America, about 15–16 per cent of the older population will make a community-based move within a six-year period (Sergeant, Ekerdt and Chapin 2008). Older Americans move for various reasons: sudden health events, ongoing functional limitations, safety, desire for a change, proactivity against potential vulnerability, the burden of property maintenance, proximity to family or amenities, change in social roles (e.g. widowhood), available housing options, and finances (Sergeant and Ekerdt 2008). Elders typically move from larger to smaller quarters and so cannot take all their belongings to the new place. Once they commit to a move, they may have to reduce the volume of their possessions by one-quarter, one-half or even more. These episodes of ‘household disbandment’ are far more focused and fraught than the voluntary campaigns that younger and middle-aged adults undertake to thin their belongings for some reason or another (Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006; Ekerdt et al. 2004; Luborsky, Lysack and Van Nuil 2011). Two months is the modal spell for household disbandment, but the episode could last anywhere from several months to only a few days. In the course of these downsizings, people address (often with help) the contents of living areas, attics, basements, garages, sheds and storage areas. Older movers reckon with categories of goods that each may encompass dozens or hundreds of items: clothes, books, tools, food, kitchen and dining utensils, personal records and documents.

In this circumstance, what is the role of safe passage as a divestment technique? This paper examines accounts of *inter vivos* transfers as older movers dealt with the contents of their household. The particular questions at issue are the level of interest that people show in the protection of their possessions, and whether the transfers also entail attempts at self transmission, as the literature would suggest. The paper considers in only a glancing way the process of ‘dispossession’, that is, the emotional separation and distancing that may occur when people part from their things (Ekerdt 2009; Roster 2001; Young and Wallendorf 1989).

Method

The data come from an ongoing study of possession management by older people during residential relocation. Between 2008 and 2010 we interviewed persons in 75 households in two areas of the Midwestern United States. We located these informants by recruiting volunteers at health fairs, within retirement communities and other housing, through community newspapers and by word-of-mouth referrals. We screened volunteers to be over the age of 62, who had moved to a smaller household within the last year, who had not moved to a nursing home, and who had been functionally able to participate in the move.

The members and circumstances of these 75 households differed. In 16 cases we interviewed couples together; 11 households were occupied only by men and 48 only by women. These 91 respondents ranged in age from 62 to 91. They had held diverse occupations. Some households had had lived in their previous home for a long time; some had made more than one post-retirement move and so had undertaken successive disbandments. Altogether, 32 households had more than 20 years of tenure at the former residence, 18 households had 10–20 years of tenure, and 25 households had lived there less than 10 years. The longest tenure had been 60 years.

In all cases, the respondents said they had less space in the new place, and had been required to dispose of things. Our semi-structured interviews centred on respondents’ recollection of activities from the period of time when they knew they would move until they did move. We asked how they came to make decisions about what they would and would not take to the new place; about methods of disposition; about the help they received; and about their

feelings throughout. We asked directly about any giving, selling, donating, or discarding of things; whether some things were harder/easier to deal with than others; whether there were critical or important things that one could or could not bring. We led informants through a list of over 20 categories of items (clothes, furniture, appliances, decorations) to prompt further disposition narratives, and this list included the category 'heirlooms'. Toward the end of interviews, we asked how people felt now about the decisions they had made. Throughout, our informants were free to privilege or specify possessions whose retention or disposal were especially storied, but we did not organise the conversations around focal items preselected as cherished or valued. When special-disposition anecdotes occurred, they were voluntary. As the interviews unfolded, participants also recounted events that occurred long before the immediate disbandment and in its aftermath.

The authors conducted some of these interviews along with research assistants. The sessions were recorded and transcribed, and in the excerpts that follow we have changed some details in order to preserve confidentiality. None of the interviewers knew the study participants prior to their study interviews. All interviewers received a common training to enhance interviewing skills, question asking and probing, and active listening. Throughout, staff reviewed recordings and transcripts in team meetings to assure consistent and sensitive data collection.

Given the fundamental gap in basic knowledge of how older adults understand, conduct and experience passing on their household objects while downsizing, we used ethnographic content and thematic methods (Luborsky 1994). Briefly, the authors each read the interviews, and then met to discuss impressions, emergent ideas and preliminary categories that captured the focal topics presented in the stories. Then, in successive rounds of independent reading, we aimed to develop an appreciation of the directly expressed ideas, concerns and considerations in our respondents' own words. We formulated a preliminary set of thematic categories and illustrative examples, and returned to apply these to several interviews, met to discuss results, identified refinements needed to code categories, then conducted coding of the entire corpus as to possession dispositions.

The findings that follow focus on the ways that older people account for their actions in taking care of their things. Our analysis discloses certain narrative strategies for presenting one's dispositions as accomplishments (either by initiative or accident), but there is also a truncation of narrative about other dispositions. We also note expressions of regret and contentment with the way things went. At the same time, the interviews for this study are informative about the actual practices of disposition.

Findings and discussion

Divestments associated with the household moves of older adults occur in an approximate sequence (Ekerdt *et al.* 2004). Initially, people try to give possessions to family members and acquaintances. Some of what remains from this step might be added to the things that are subsequently offered for sale or donation. Finally, things residualised after attempts at giving, selling and donating are discarded (or perhaps retained and stored for later resolution after the move). Here, accounts of special dispositions were more likely as people talked of giving things away to others, but possessions occasionally found good homes by sale or donation.

In the four sections that follow, we present findings on safe-passage stories; on a kind of giveaway – the 'offer' – that was widely used; on the failure to place things; and on people's assessment of their efforts.

Accounts of safe passage

Among the many possessions that are foregrounded and backgrounded in these interviews, what might qualify as a story of ‘safe passage’? Based on previous literature about the transmission of cherished possessions (Hunter and Rowles 2005; Marcoux 2001; Marx, Solomon and Miller 2004; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000), there are up to three features of such accounts. First, the owner has shown some initiative in bringing the placement about, and this may include having scouted or assessed potential recipients. Second, safe-passage accounts describe an ‘afterward’, an assurance about either the physical protection of the thing, or appreciation of the item by its new owner. Third, the placement is thought to project the values, personality or identity of the giver, that is, it has created a legacy.

In our interviews, stories with all three features – initiative, an afterward and legacy – were few. Here are three such anecdotes, notable for their having all three elements. In the first, about a fishing reel, an 85-year-old widow tells of selecting just the right recipient, how the gift was received, and how it deposits a memory of her late husband and herself as a neighbourly couple. In this telling, the reel also comes to the fore out of an unremarkable ‘bunch of fishing stuff’:

There was a whole bunch of fishing stuff. I had gotten rid of all the lures and my kids thought that was awful; I had done it earlier. And I probably should have kept those. And one of the things that my husband had been given was a reel that was rather expensive – it was still in the box. We moved from Columbus and went to Wisconsin. He was going to do a lot of fishing in Wisconsin but that didn’t work out. He didn’t become quite the fisherman he thought he’d be. So this was still in the box. There were young girls on our street who, as little girls, we’d take them to lunch once in a while. And one, when she was over one time she talked about what she wanted to be when she got older and she said she’d like a big house and to go fishing. So we thought about that, and had special feelings for these girls. So after he died, I asked Amber, ‘Would you like this reel?’ So we found it and I had no idea what it cost – I’m thinking it was rather expensive. But so she has the reel now. And she was quite thrilled with it at the time.

In this next account, a gift of books has not happened yet, but plans are in place for grandchild recipients with an eye to their readiness for the books and with an explicit intention about legacy. This woman had lived in her house for 40 years:

I have some [books] that are very, very old. Some I have already designated to go to grandchildren because they are books I read when I was a child, so see that’s a long time ago. They won’t appreciate it right now but my good intentions are to write a note for each book to each grandchild ... and tell them what I did with the book and why I had it. I would like them to keep it. So that’s something I’ll do. I did that with different things that I brought [when I moved]. I didn’t have time to write the note then and my oldest grandchild is now a junior in college. She’s very interested but she doesn’t have the place to keep them or anything. And then my youngest is only 11. And they’re more interested in soccer or whatever, but eventually they will, and I’ll have it ready for them.

This third full account is about a donation. A 66-year-old woman placed two wedding dresses with a museum that would care for them. She did not speak of her own legacy but did want to honour her mother, and in the face of family indifference:

I gave my mother’s wedding dress and my wedding dress to a charity and I’m blanking on the name right now. They collect wedding dresses and they have a resale thing but they also have a museum-type thing for historical wedding dresses. Mine made it into the historical one as well as my mother’s (laughs). But they

refurbish them and clean them, which is a delicate job. So that was pleasing because what are you going to do? You can't just put your mother's wedding dress in the trash! You can't! But yet, you never look at it. None of my kids want this stuff. So again, finding homes for things.

Stories of safe passage that lacked the legacy intention were more common, but they still recalled the speaker's initiative and concern about the eventual protection of the object. Roster (2001) observed storytelling at sales, which was exactly the technique of this 80-year-old woman as she literally introduced her things to their buyers in order to influence how they would 'end up':

Interviewer: At the auction did you make a lot of money and was that important?

Respondent: No, that was not important. And I would talk to the people after they bought it. I would give them a little background story about where it came from, who had it. And it's like getting a puppy. ... I probably could've donated it someplace, but I didn't know how it would end up, and at least I could go watch it at auction and talk to the people who bought it and things like that.

Initiative and object protection were featured in this story of houseplants from a widow, 82 years old, who had been an estate seller and therefore a professional disposer of objects. She cannily engineered the transfer of her houseplants to someone who would really want them:

Interviewer: Did you have houseplants, or ...

Informant: Oh, yes. *Lots* of houseplants [emphasis of speaker].

Interviewer: Did you sell those?

Informant: I gave them away. Yeah. Up at the Warburg Bank there was a, oh, the president of the bank up there. She had done a lot of helping with a lot of different things. And so I was up there one day and I said 'You've been down to my house and you've seen all of my plants' and she said [gasps, mimicking] 'Oh, can I come down?' And I said yes. So, I come down and I let her take whatever she wanted. So...

As expressed on the sound recording, the concluding 'So...' was a statement of satisfaction at things having gone as planned.

The effort to place things so that they would find continued utility was also gratifying to our informants: theological books from one man's father given to a local pastor; household items given to a homeless shelter; medical equipment given to a home health nurse for use by other patients; heirloom rosaries given to a Catholic church. In all, safe passages of selected items were happily and proudly recalled by our informants, but they dotted rather than dominated the interviews about household downsizing.

Offering and claiming

More commonly in these interviews, large quantities of items were said to be passed to others by means of offering and claiming. In the recollection of this, givers do not report initiatives to match specific objects with recipients. Rather, one volunteers sets of possessions to others who volunteer to take them. These techniques were tried in nearly all households, and the strategy has certain advantages. Practically, a lot of things could be dispatched this way; 'offers' are a means to equitable distribution in case there are multiple claimants; and it is easier to offer batches of things than engage in the who-when-how decision-making of special dispositions (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). Offers to take

things may have a disappointing take-up or be met with indifference, but the emotional risk is less than is the case with direct gift attempts.

Scenarios of ‘offering’, usually to family members, were recounted as discrete events during the household downsizing. Our informants recalled that ‘I let them come in and get whatever they wanted’, or recalled saying ‘Can you use this? Take it!’ The voluntary quality of these transfers is conveyed by this woman’s use of the word ‘selections’: ‘Our son, who lives here, came and made some selections, and our daughter who lives in Tucson, as I said, she came and made selections’. This 81-year-old widow offered anything that she was not taking to the new place, and with modest results:

I knew exactly what I wanted to bring here. Called the kids over, the five of them, and said, ‘Take what you want. Here’s what I’m taking: my front room, my kitchen, my bedroom. Whatever else, you take!’ And they did, they picked around. But they have all their own homes, so they don’t need lots.

One might make offers of certain categories of things. One couple had ‘an unbelievable amount of Christmas decorations’. After they packed off a carload to a charity shop: ‘The rest of it we put out on the dining room table and the buffet and so forth, and invited people in. So we gave some of it away that way’. Another woman did the same with jewellery: ‘I called the grandchildren over and I put away the jewellery that I wanted to take, and then put out the rest of the jewellery. Most of the grandkids took all the jewellery. Some of it, what they didn’t take, I put in the garage sale’. Offers could be made with a sense of humour. One woman laughed as she recalled telling her children and grandchildren: ‘You can’t leave till you take books! You can’t leave till you take records!’

Our interviews have passages in which people recited a list of distributions without much emotion or detail; they were not ‘storied as special dispositions at any rate. Things were: taken, went, picked out, spoken for or wound up with someone. For example, this widow, 87, recalled her daughter and son and his wife coming from out of state and driving away in a 14-foot U-Haul rental truck ‘packed full’ with a piano, bedroom set, dining room set, ‘all my glassware’, three sets of dishes, cookware, linens and Christmas decorations.

Another version of voluntary offerings and takings has others claiming possessions that they presumably know are available to them. Interviewing this 65-year-old woman, we asked directly about specific object–recipient matching but she made a reply about conflict-free claiming:

Interviewer: So things were given to family. Who decided which person got what in the family, or how did you go about it?

Respondent: Well, basically, people just said, ‘Well, I’d like to have such and such’. And it was just mutually agreed. I think we had, I don’t think we have any hard feelings, you know. That was better than I thought it was going to be, actually.

In this couple’s claiming account, the initiative was all with the recipients:

Wife: We have four granddaughters. The girls sent us lists of glassware...

Husband: They’re all in college, or three of the four are in college.

Wife: Three of the four are in college. Antique china and whatnot, they sent us lists of that stuff that they wanted. And I just packed it up and put their names on the boxes and put them in the storage locker. So they’ve got all of that stuff. I wanted them to have something, rather than just put it all in the sale. The one girl was so cute. She wanted a couple of tables,

and a lamp, and a bunch of glassware, and I said, 'Jeepers, she's only a freshman in college!' And her mother says, 'Well, none of it's going to college. It's going to stay here. She can't take that antique glass to school'.

Offering and claiming expedite the disposition of possessions, yet there is a circumstance that allows safe-passage stories to emerge from amid all the 'taking'. This occurs when family members or friends make claims of objects that are surprising as to the kinds of things that they ask for. Such claims, in retrospect, make it possible for our informants to conclude that some possession has ended up with just the right person. Surprising claims are all the initiative of the recipient and they can redeem ordinary dispositions. This woman, age 65 and widowed for seven years, was asked if she had donated any of her clothing or that of her late husband. She recalled sorting some items, but then:

I took them out just to donate someplace and my daughter took my dress out of there, and she put it up in her closet. And my son from Kentucky said, 'Well, send me dad's shirts. I might want to wear them!' (Laughs) So I sent the shirts to him.

Photos can be a vexing kind of possession to allocate. This woman, age 80, was prepared to throw a quantity of vacation slides away, but they were rescued by a grandson-in-law:

We had travelled a lot and took a lot of slides of our travels. And we used to give slide shows when we came back. We had boxes and boxes and boxes of slides! I thought, 'Oh, I just hate to throw those away, but I'm not going to take them with me'. Well, the husband of one of my granddaughters just thought that they were the most wonderful things in the world. And he was delighted! He took them all and he took the slide carousel. So that worked out well.

In other surprise claimings, a grandson took a geriatric wheelchair. One woman talked of her two sons, who 'had the choice of things that they would want. You know it was kind of interesting some of the things they took'. For example: 'We used to have Early American furniture and we had an eagle on the wall. So he [our son] took the eagle. Things like that. That really surprised me'. For another woman, when her son took her cedar chest for his daughter, 'I think that was the most surprising part of the move. Things that I never would have thought my children wanted were what they wanted'. Later in the interview, she was asked about any collections, and she said she had had a collection of spoons:

Respondent: Because, well, we travelled considerably. So I did, I had two of those spoon cases. My oldest granddaughter asked for those.

Interviewer: Oh nice.

Respondent: Yes, I was very pleased. And very surprised. I didn't think that she was interested, but she said 'Oh no, I want those!'

All of the things cited above – clothes, slides, furniture, spoons – had found good homes. Yet the happy outcomes had occurred not by the elder's initiative but by accident.

Non-placement

By design or by surprise, possessions can receive safe passage. The safe passage theme appeared in another way in our interviews, via expressions of regret at not having been able to place things appropriately. Gift refusals have been noted in other studies of older people and dispositions (Marcoux 2001; Marx, Solomon and Miller 2004). So it was in the households that we visited. A number of our interviewees were frustrated in placing things that they had thought would be well received. For example, three people had wanted to give pianos to specific children who had turned out not to be interested, and the pianos went

elsewhere. When one woman tried to give either of two oil paintings owned by her late husband to one of his sons, he said, 'I don't want either one – I hate both of them'. Failed sales were another way that safe passage was frustrated, *e.g.* dealer disinterest in a Tiffany-style lamp, undervalued art books. This couple pointed out that their adult children were decidedly not an outlet for valued things. The wife spoke first:

What surprises me ... the things that we thought were so important early in our marriages – like china, crystal and silver – are not really desirable this time, now. My kids won't – don't care for it, because it's work and it's not very serviceable and it's upkeep, and they, none of them have room. It's storage and they are all kind of against that.

Her husband repeated the theme a few minutes later: 'Unless it is a sharp heirloom and still of functional use, our kids' generation don't really want much of what we have'.

Evaluation

Toward the end of the interviews, we asked people how they now feel (after the move) about their decisions about what to keep and what not to keep. We also asked if 'you lost a bit of yourself when you gave up things'. By and large, these women and men were contented with what had happened. They said that they feel good about it, feel at peace, have no regrets. They may go on to say that they miss having this or that belonging at hand or note that some things could have been handled in a better way. And when asked if there had been possessions that were harder to deal with, people replied, some quite vividly, about emotions on parting with particular objects. Yet, by way of explaining their possession management, our respondents also reminded us about the constraints they had been under. Having committed to move, they said that they only had so much space in the new place and only had so much time to accomplish the downsizing. As a practical matter, things had to be dealt with presently and in large quantities. Perhaps this is why 'offers' were such a widely reported technique.

Even when our interviews did not disclose extensive storytelling about the thoughtful placing of selected items, people did express satisfaction that their possessions had found appreciative owners. In the pair of excerpts that follow, two women, ages 66 and 72 and both divorced, reflected that giving things to others had been more gratifying than selling would have been:

Mostly, I tried to find homes for things. I found that, for me, giving them away to people I knew who could either use them or wanted them or had always admired them. For example, I had a huge secretary, tall, glass-fronted thing, and a very close friend has always loved it. None of my kids wanted or needed it, so she got it. Now, I could have sold it but that's a lot of work to find the market and also you don't get much for things, even nice antiques. Plus, it gave me so much satisfaction to give things away to people.

I wanted the kids to have whatever. I wouldn't sell anything they wanted. ... I said, 'What do you want? Do you want – can you use any of this stuff? Take it'. And my nephews took it. So it was just take, take what you want. And so that was the first thing. And my friends – the people I know, sometimes people come for dinner. One of their daughters just loved a painting I had and I just took it off the wall and handed it to her. It gave me a lot of pleasure. I gave a lot of things that I knew some of my friends liked, I just handed it to them because I figured I'm not going to get much money selling this stuff. It's really going to be pennies. It means nothing and it would really mean something to this other person, either before they said they

like it or I knew they would love it. So I gave a lot of stuff away to friends and family and things like that.

To report that one's belongings are now being used and appreciated by others is also to report that one has been care-full with things, one has seen them through. In the evaluation of it all, some even reported forgiving themselves for not having been even more protective of possessions. The widow whom we earlier cited for the safe passage of her houseplants could not at last care for the residual belongings of her late husband:

When [my children] all came out to help pack up that night, why, they'd find something that belonged to their dad, and they'd bring it up to me, and they'd say, 'Mama, do you want this?' And I'd say 'No, I don't want it. If you want it you can have it, but if not just leave it and we'll sell it'. And, um, but it finally got to me that night. I finally broke down, and I just couldn't take it anymore, because, you know, just so much of the stuff was, that he had loved, and everything. But, I didn't need it anymore. So I just, I told myself, 'Ruth Ann, don't get upset, just go ahead, because if Paul was here he would want you to go ahead and do just that'.

This was frustration on two levels: one, that objects had no family takers and would be relegated to sale, and two, that her late husband's love of these things would not be conserved in the family. Yet she had, at least, tried to take care of them.

Conclusion

Household disbandment is an extraordinary episode of possession divestment that is nonetheless typical of residential, community-based moves in later life. Our informants, looking back within the first year of the move, reported having made or planned special dispositions with which they said they were pleased. Similar to the stories that proceed from the cherished-possession technique, our interviews about these whole-house projects disclosed accounts that touch on the protection of things along with the initiative that was taken to transfer them to new, appreciative owners. At the same time, a larger volume of possessions changed hands by being volunteered to others who volunteered to take them. Family and friends claimed things, sometimes in response to an undifferentiated offer to 'take what you want'. These claimings were sometimes unexpected and surprising, but gratifying nonetheless. So possessions were given safe passage to others, sometimes by intention and sometimes adventitiously.

Was the self passed along with the goods? This is a strong contention of the literature on the special dispositions of elders, that people can transcend their mortality by depositing a memory of their identity (or the family heritage) in a new household or among the next generation (Hunter and Rowles 2005; Marcoux 2001; Marx, Solomon and Miller 2004; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). Our interviews, however, did not disclose extensive legacy-making as an adjunct or motive for dispositions during these relocations. Our informants may implicitly enjoy the prospect of being remembered, but they did not often speak outright about shaping that memory. Of course, there may have been more attention to self-transmission than we were told about. And our project's interviewers were probably not the first persons to have heard the story of the move and its details about what went where. At some months' remove, people are likely to become quite practised at this. In the end, we do not know what happened in the moment, but we do know what people tell stories about, and legacy-making was an infrequent theme. In future research, the extent of attempts at self-transmission might be more accurately gauged by ethnographic studies that accompany and observe elders throughout the disposition process. In particular, legacy-making may be more prevalent or urgent among older movers who are divesting radically as they enter nursing homes.

Special possession divestments may be a project undertaken, as suggested in the literature, to distribute the self into the future. But we want to suggest that the experience may reconstitute the self in another way: as agentic and present. Having come through a whole-house disbandment, one is left with a set of stories, a portfolio of anecdotes that sums to something more than tales of this or that item. Kleine and Baker (2004) note that possessions have a storytelling value. In this case, possession management during disbandment, especially in recollecting safe passages, can be deployed for the presentation of the self as a care-full person. One's fidelity to belongings affirms a quality of conscientiousness. Stories about the fate of things, or even stories about the failure to place things, are ways to represent oneself as responsible and solicitous. An affirmation of the present self as accomplished and careful can be seen as a positive adaptation to the narrowing life world (Marsiske *et al.* 1995). Individuals can make the claim – via their set of safe-passage accounts – that they have chosen to put themselves on a new footing with a smaller set of possessions, and that the outcome is satisfactory. The household is reduced, but things were taken care of, and the self has come safely through the move. One woman made this point exactly when we asked her whether, in giving up things, she had lost a bit of herself. 'If I did', she replied, 'it's been replaced with a feeling of safety. And the feeling that I was able to do it all myself. That's a great ego builder. ... And so I probably gained more by moving than I lost.

As a practical matter, the special disposition – as intentional placing – is a strategy that has a role in household disbandment, but it does not facilitate the move to undertake who–when–how decisions (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000) about too many things. Even a modest household contains uncounted thousands of items and one can only specially place a fraction of them. Divestment is laborious under routine circumstances (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2007; Hetherington 2004), but under the time constraints of disbandment there must be efficiency. Things must move. Of the process of *casser maison* (breaking the home) by elders, Marcoux (2001: 217) writes that 'it is important to control the dispersal of objects, to make the good "placements", to find the person who will be the most appropriate for such a piece of furniture or such an object'. Such an emphasis on the optimisation of transfers, we would aver, is only likely to slow the work. Such an emphasis, moreover, narrows the repertoire of ways by which older people can do right by their possessions and exercise responsibility and agency in disposition. Our view is that some belongings can be satisfactorily placed in just the right setting, but other belongings will happen to get safely passed by chance or by the kindness of claimants, and these dispositions can be satisfactory, too. And having taken some care of some things makes a good story about the self.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Jaber Gubrium, Aislinn Addington, Kathy Cross, Ben Hayter, Gabriella Smith and Jennifer Van Nuil for their assistance. This research was supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging, AG1778 and AG30477. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute on Aging or the National Institutes of Health.

References

- Belk RW. Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 1988; 15(2):139–68.
- Callero PL. The sociology of the self. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2003; 29:115–33.
- Carstensen LL. The influence of a sense of time on human development. *Science*. 2006; 312(5782): 1913–5. [PubMed: 16809530]
- Csikszentmihalyi, M.; Rochberg-Halton, E. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge University Press; New York: 1981.
- Curasi CF, Price LL, Arnould EJ. How individuals' cherished possessions become families' inalienable wealth. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 2004; 31(3):609–22.

- Ekerdt, DJ. Dispossession: the tenacity of things. In: Jones, IR.; Higgs, P.; Ekerdt, DJ., editors. *Consumption and Generational Change: The Rise of Consumer Lifestyles and the Transformation of Later Life*. Transaction Books; Piscataway, New Jersey: 2009. p. 63-78.
- Ekerdt DJ, Sergeant JF. Family things: attending the household disbandment of older adults. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 2006; 20(3):193–205. [PubMed: 17047729]
- Ekerdt DJ, Sergeant JF, Dingel M, Bowen ME. Household disbandment in later life. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2004; 59B(5):S265–73.
- Gosling SD, Craik KH, Martin NR, Pryor MR. The Personal Living Space Cue Inventory: an analysis and evaluation. *Environment and Behavior*. 2005; 37(5):683–705.
- Gregson N, Metcalfe A, Crewe L. Moving things along: the conduits and practices of divestment in consumption. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 2007; 32(2):187–200.
- Gubrium JF, Holstein JA. The self in a world of going concerns. *Symbolic Interaction*. 2000; 23:95–115.
- Herrmann G. Gift or commodity: what changes hands in the U.S. garage sale? *American Ethnologist*. 1997; 24(4):910–30.
- Hetherington K. Second-handedness: consumption, disposal and absent presence. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 2004; 22(1):157–73.
- Hunter EG, Rowles GD. Leaving a legacy: toward a typology. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 2005; 19(3): 327–47.
- Kamptner, NL. Personal possessions and their meanings in old age. In: Spacapan, S.; Oskamp, S., editors. *The Social Psychology of Aging*. Sage; Newbury Park, California: 1989. p. 165-96.
- Kleine SS, Baker SM. An integrative review of material possession attachment. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*. 2004; 1 Available online at <http://www.amsreview.org/articles/kleine01-2004.pdf>.
- Kroger J, Adair V. Symbolic meanings of valued personal objects in identity transitions of late adulthood. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*. 2008; 8(1):5–24.
- Lastovicka JL, Fernandez KV. Three paths to disposition: the movement of meaningful possessions to strangers. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 2005; 31(4):813–23.
- Luborsky, MR. Identifying themes and patterns. In: Gubrium, J.; Sankar, A., editors. *Qualitative Methods in Aging Research*. Sage; Thousand Oaks, California: 1994. p. 189-210.
- Luborsky MR, Lysack CL, Van Nuil J. Refashioning one's place in time: Stories of household downsizing in later life. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 2011; 25:243–252. [PubMed: 21765597]
- Marcoux J-S. The 'casser maison' ritual: constructing the self by emptying the home. *Journal of Material Culture*. 2001; 6(2):213–35.
- Marshall VW. Age and awareness of finitude in developmental gerontology. *Omega*. 1975; 6(2):113–29.
- Marsiske, M.; Lang, FR.; Baltes, PB.; Baltes, MM. Selective optimization with compensation: life-span perspectives on successful human development. In: Dixon, RA.; Bäckman, L., editors. *Compensating for Psychological Deficits and Declines: Managing Losses and Promoting Gains*. Erlbaum; Mahway, New Jersey: 1995. p. 35-79.
- Marx JI, Solomon JC, Miller LQ. Gift wrapping ourselves: the final gift exchange. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2004; 59B(5):S274–80.
- McCracken G. Culture and consumption among the elderly: three research objectives in an emerging field. *Ageing & Society*. 1987; 7(2):203–24.
- McCracken G. *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. University of Indiana Press; Bloomington, Indiana: 1988.
- Morris BR. Reducing inventory: divestiture of personal possessions. *Journal of Women and Aging*. 1992; 4(2):79–92.
- Price LL, Arnould EJ, Curasi CF. Older consumers' disposition of special possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 2000; 27(2):179–201.
- Roster, CA. Letting go: the process and meaning of dispossession in the lives of consumers. In: Gilley, MC.; Meyers-Levy, J., editors. *Advances in Consumer Research*. Vol. 28. Association for Consumer Research; Provo, Utah: 2001. p. 425-30.

- Sergeant JF, Ekerdt DJ. Motives for residential mobility in later life: post-move perspectives of elders and family members. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*. 2008; 66(2):131–54. [PubMed: 18453180]
- Sergeant JF, Ekerdt DJ, Chapin R. Measurement of late-life residential relocation: why are rates for such a manifest event so varied? *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2008; 63B(2):S92–8.
- Smith GV, Ekerdt DJ. Confronting the material convoy in later life. *Sociological Inquiry*. 2011; 81 doi:10.1111/j.1475-682X.2011.00378.x.
- Stum MS. I just want to be fair': interpersonal justice in intergenerational transfers of non-titled property. *Family Relations*. 1999; 48(2):159–66.
- Stum MS. Families and inheritance decisions: examining non-titled property transfers. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*. 2000; 21(2):177–202.
- Unruh DR. Death and personal history: strategies of identity preservation. *Social Problems*. 1983; 30(3):340–51.
- Weiss, RS.; Bass, SA. *Challenges of the Third Age: Meaning and Purpose in Later Life*. Oxford University Press; New York: 2002.
- Young, MM.; Wallendorf, M. In: Childers, TL.; Bagozzi, RP.; Peter, JP., editors. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust': conceptualizing consumer disposition of possessions*; Proceedings of the American Marketing Association Winter Educators Conference; American Marketing Association, Chicago. 1989; p. 33-9.