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Possession divestment by sales in later life

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ABSTRACT

Residential relocation in later life is almost always a downsizing, with many possessions to be divested in a short period of time. This article examines older movers' capacities for selling things, and ways that selling attenuates people's ties to those things, thus accomplishing the human dispossession of the material convoy. In qualitative interviews in 79 households in the Midwestern United States, older adults reported their experience with possession sales associated with residential relocation. Among this group, three-quarters of the households downsized by selling some belongings. Informal sales seemed the least fraught of all strategies, estate sales had mixed reviews, and garage sales were recalled as laborious. Sellers' efforts were eased by social relations and social networks as helpers and buyers came forward. As selling proceeded, sentiment about possessions waned as their materiality and economic value came to the fore, easing their detachment from the household. Possession selling is challenging because older adults are limited in the knowledge, skills, and efforts that they can apply to the recommodification of their belongings. Selling can nonetheless be encouraged as a divestment strategy as long as the frustrations and drawbacks are transparent, and the goal of ridding is kept in view.

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Introduction

One's possessions as a whole can be conceived as a convoy of material support that accompanies an individual or a household across the course of life. Possessions join the convoy (by various means), drop away, or endure; may be regarded as more or less important; may be shared with others; and are maintained for all sorts of practical and emotional reasons. They may even be forgotten about, but are possessed nonetheless (Ekerdt, 2015).

In theory, the material convoy should expand to furnish wider role involvements across adulthood and then contract when no longer needed to equip daily life or support the self (Belk, 1988). In practice, however, there is a well-known tendency for possessions to accumulate, and the value and

retention of these household contents can become a concern to self and others (Luborsky, Lysack, & Van Nuil, 2011; Perry, 2012). There is evidence of inertia toward possession divestment in later life such that people are progressively less likely to shed things routinely after age 50 (Ekerdt & Baker, 2014).

Residential relocation, which occurs at an annual rate between four and five percent after age 65 (Haverstick & Zhivan, 2009), casts a sharp light on the continued maintenance of the material convoy. Having committed to the project of residential relocation, household members put themselves on a timetable when real estate and rental contracts at the old and new places set dates for the move. Even if one first moves and later settles the status of the former home, the financial obligation to two properties will want resolution. In later life, people typically move from larger to smaller spaces (Banks, Blundell, Oldfield, & Smith, 2010) and so must divest possessions to do so. They may already have regular divestment routines as a matter of managing their households and even readying themselves for a potential move, but with relocation arrangements in place, now the downsizing is exigent.

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Relocation episodes present a concentrated opportunity to observe people's methods of possession divestment. There is an array of strategies for doing this, strategies that might be used by persons of any age for any divestment. These tactics, culturally familiar, include giving things to family and friends, selling them, donating them to agencies, throwing them away, and storing them elsewhere (Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, & Bowen, 2004; Gregson, Metcalfe, & Crewe, 2007a, b). Each offers potential conduits to dispose large quantities of things or even settle certain things in the most suitable location. But each strategy can also disappoint the disposer by being impractical or emotionally frustrating (e.g., gifts refused, sale prices not met, trash restricted). Individuals may not foresee the difficulties of any one strategy before actually trying it. This paper examines one type of divestment strategy—selling things—and two dimensions in particular. One question is people's practical ability when it comes to selling, and the other is the emotional processes that help sellers detach things from the material convoy. Both foci offer potential insight about the relative ease with which relocation can be accomplished in later life.

As to ability, a lifetime of consumer experience with the rituals of buying and selling would seem to give older people some aptitude for commerce on behalf of their own belongings. For elders who are moving, selling is commonly encouraged; a review of advice manuals about elders and downsizing (Smith & Ekerdt, 2011) shows that all authors suggest the strategy. The rise of online auction sites and also the proliferation of reality television programs about antiques, pawn shops, and storage-unit scavengers may likewise encourage people to imagine the material convoy as potential commodities (Caramanica, 2011; Clouse, 2008; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010).

At any age and circumstance, whoever resolves to sell a possession will take that item on a journey, or, more properly, a further journey. Most possessions originate as commodities—objects with an exchange value. In the course of keeping, the object withdraws from the sphere of exchange and takes on other values in a process that has been called de-commoditization, singularization, or appropriation (Kopytoff, 1986; Miller, 2012). The thing is made over as “mine.” To later sell a possession is to reinsert it into the sphere of exchange, but by this time the object likely has aged (making it less or more valuable) and the market for it has probably shifted. Not only does the thing for sale need a price, it somehow needs a presentation to likely buyers. Cleaning and refurbishing may be necessary. The successful re-commoditization of the object thus takes knowledge, skills, and effort. One might need to know the value of similar things, the sites where they could be sold, and how to interact with agents who could manage the selling (Gregson et al., 2007b; Herrmann, 1997; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005).

Selling is likewise shedding things from their place in the material convoy. Things kept, perhaps for a long time, will now drop away. Research on possessions in later life has tended to emphasize the fixed meanings of belongings (Marx, Solomon, & Miller, 2004; Morris, 1992; Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000). The method of most studies has been to probe the meanings of important or cherished belongings. The focus on cherished objects brings symbolic properties to the fore along with an impression that older people are emotionally attached to belongings. In household downsizings, by contrast, the status of a much wider range of possessions—potentially all of

them—is up for consideration. By the very decision to relocate, these are things that are going into motion.

After an initial sorting to set aside what will be retained, downsizings have a rough sequence of strategies where people first attempt to give or offer things to others (Ekerdt et al., 2004). Movers may undertake special dispositions in order to protect the physical and symbolic properties of their belongings and, in so doing, perhaps secure a legacy for the givers' values, personality, and identity (Addington & Ekerdt, 2014; Marx et al., 2004; Price et al., 2000). Such placings can achieve “safe passage” of the object as well as the self (Ekerdt, Luborsky, & Lysack, 2012; Roster, 2001). Upon testing the value of things to others by these gifts and offers, unclaimed things may be offered for sale (and further steps are donation or discard). The intention to sell a thing signals that whatever practical, biographical, sentimental, or hedonic value it has had, these meanings are about to be eclipsed by its exchange value as a salable good. As possessions take this route, certain divestment rituals can further help attenuate sentiment about things (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005; McCracken, 1988; Roster, 2001).

For elders downsizing, there are additional considerations about this stage of life that may affect one's abilities as a seller as well as the emotional process of divestment. Aging may make sales more difficult. (1) Some of the household's contents, by virtue of their owner's age, have been out of the commercial context for a long time, and so their value may be difficult to estimate. (2) Physical limitations may interfere with the labor needed to retrieve, clean, organize, and present items, and limit the energy needed to negotiate and bargain with buyers and agents. (3) The moves are constrained by time, with household disbandments typically occurring in a modal period of about two months (Ekerdt et al., 2004), and this precludes exploratory sallies into methods for selling things. Yet, the situation may make sales easier. (4) The time constraints on a move could focus efforts to more efficiency. (5) Moves in later life occur in the context of a narrowing life world that will affect the practical utility and social value of some goods (e.g., tools for home projects, housewares for entertaining, sporting equipment), making them easier to divest. (6) Moves by elders often mobilize family members to help (Ekerdt & Sergeant, 2006), and this could extend to assistance with sales.

At any stage of life, moving “is intrinsically connected with divestment; it requires decisions to be made over what to keep and what to discard” (Gregson et al., 2007a, p. 696). Relocation in later life is almost always a downsizing, with a lot of possessions to be surplus in a short period of time. Among other strategies for doing so, this paper examines older movers' capacities for selling things, and ways that selling attenuates people's ties to those things, thus accomplishing the human dis-possession of the material convoy. The reduction of the convoy, in turn, makes relocation more feasible, especially if undertaken as an adaptation to aging.

Methods

The data come from a qualitative interview study of possession management by older adults who had changed residence. Between 2008 and 2013 we interviewed persons in 79 households in two geographic areas of the Midwestern United States. Volunteers were recruited within retirement

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