



Women with dementia and their handbags: Negotiating identity, privacy and ‘home’ through material culture

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 September 2013

Received in revised form 11 March 2014

Accepted 11 March 2014

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Dementia
Material culture
Dress
Identity
Spatiality

ABSTRACT

The article analyses the role of handbags in the everyday lives of women with dementia. Drawing on findings from an ESRC funded UK study ‘Dementia and Dress’, it shows how handbags are significant to supporting the identities of women with dementia as ‘biographical’ and ‘memory’ objects, both in terms of the bags themselves, and the objects they contain. This is particularly so during the transition to care homes, where previous aspects of identity and social roles may be lost. Handbags are also significant to making personal or private space within care settings. However, dementia can heighten women’s ambivalent relationship to their handbags, which can become a source of anxiety as ‘lost objects’, or may be viewed as problematic or ‘unruly’. Handbags may also be adapted or discarded due to changing bodies, lifestyles and the progression of dementia.

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Introduction

Handbags occupy a special place in the lives of many women. Freighted with social and personal meaning, they are about much more than the practicalities of life. They are items of fashion, markers of public identity and status. But they are also intensely private. Closely connected to the individual, they contain an assortment of objects designed to provide support in the enactment of self: make up, scarves, identity cards, money, personal photographs, talismans, memory objects. They are spaces that others may not enter without permission, and their privacy and interiority mimics aspects of the female body, so that their secret, private and enclosed character stands as an emblem of the embodied self. In this article we enter this private world of handbags, exploring the ways their use can shed insight on the embodied lives of women with dementia. In doing so we also address the role of material objects in the day to day experiences of people with dementia.

We have argued elsewhere that dress has a role to play in the maintenance of the self in dementia (Twigg, 2010; Twigg & Buse, 2013). In this article we focus on a particular aspect of dress – handbags – using it as a lens for understanding how women with dementia negotiate identity, memories, security and privacy through material culture. The article begins by considering the implications of material culture – including clothing – for the everyday lives of people with dementia. It then introduces handbags as a significant yet under-researched aspect of dress, that has implications for the constitution of identity in everyday life, and the ordering of age, gender, and class. These arguments are developed drawing on qualitative research findings from an ESRC funded UK study ‘Dementia and Dress’. Firstly, it is argued that handbags acted as ‘memory’ and ‘biographical’ objects for women with dementia, sometimes representing an ‘extension of the self’ which individuals may be reluctant to discard. We argue that this takes on particular significance during the passage to institutional care, going on to explore how handbags help to retain ontological security during this transition. This is followed by an analysis of how handbags illuminate – and trouble – symbolic and material divisions of public/private in care home settings, and may be

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utilised to negotiate a private space in this context. The article also explores handbags as 'unruly' spaces, and the ways ambivalent aspects of women's relationship to their handbags may be exacerbated by the progression of the condition. The article concludes by discussing implications for person-centred dementia care, and broader understandings of material culture and later life.

Dementia, clothing and material culture

Within dementia studies there is growing interest in the material context of the condition and the role of objects in sustaining – or failing to sustain – identity and relationships. Ethnographic research in dementia care settings has shown how material objects can mediate attachments (Stephens, Cheston, & Gleeson, 2012) and facilitate interactions and relationships with other residents (Saunders, Medeiros, Doyle, & Mosby, 2012). Jones (2004) argues that we need to recognise the value of objects in maintaining meaningful attachments as dementia progresses, and the world becomes increasingly estranged and unfamiliar. Material objects can help people with dementia maintain connections to past social identities and roles, as well as providing a sense of comfort and security.

The significance of material objects is increasingly recognised and utilised in dementia care practice. A growing number of care homes use dolls to comfort residents (Learner, 2013), drawing on evidence for the benefits of 'doll therapy' (Higgins, 2010). The use of objects and images is also central to reminiscence therapy and life-history work, including use of the 'memory boxes' to gather objects which are connected to a person's life (Gulwadi, 2013; Schweitzer, 2005). Such work has shown how objects – including clothes – can be powerful triggers for memory, as the feel, smell and touch of these items have a strong affective dimension, evoking memories of the past (Schweitzer, 2007; Schweitzer, Bruce, & Gibson, 2008).

Dementia, however, can disrupt our embodied way of 'being in the world', including our relationship to material objects. Phinney and Chesla (2003) argue that dementia involves a disruption of the skilled body, so that objects normally used habitually, drawing on pre-reflexive, embodied knowledge, become something we have to stop and think about. Such objects are no longer 'ready at hand', and people with dementia may spend considerable time trying to use and locate objects and equipment. This also applies to clothing and dress; and there is a body of work on functionality and dress that suggests that the ability to dress and choose clothing independently becomes increasingly impaired as dementia progresses (e.g. Baldelli, Boiardi, Ferrari, Bianchi, & Hunscott Bianchi, 2007; Beck, Heacock, Mercer, Walton, & Shook, 1991).

On the other hand, Kontos' (2003, 2004) research suggests that selfhood continues to reside at the level of the body among people with dementia, enacted through habitual embodied gestures, actions and routines. In relation to dress, she gives the example of a woman with dementia carefully placing her string of pearls on top of her bib, enacting her class and gendered identity. Therefore whilst some elements of embodied knowledge appear to be lost as dementia progresses, other elements may remain, and continue to express selfhood at an embodied level.

There is evidence to suggest that clothing can be significant to maintaining embodied personhood. Clothes are central to the expression of identity, both personal and social (Breward, 2000; Entwistle, 2000; Twigg, 2013). They are a key element in the performativity of the self, both expressing the self and acting back on it at a directly bodily level. They signal to the wider social world who a person is and how they should be treated. For people with dementia, maintaining appearance through clothing can be crucial for how they are seen by others, enabling them to avoid the stigma of the dementia patient, marked by neglect and deterioration of dress. Even for those at an advanced stage of dementia the embodied, tactile nature of clothing can be significant as part of the 'environment closest in', the immediate physical soundings of the body (Twigg, 2010; Twigg & Buse, 2013). Dress is also highly important for relatives as a way of maintaining a sense of the person they were. At the same time, clothes can present practical challenges in care settings, with tensions between maintaining identity through dress, and ease of care.

Handbags and identity

As an aspect of dress, handbags have been described as an 'extension of the self' (Kaufman, 2011, p. 8) or an 'identity kit' (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p. 57) – a literal container for the self. They are significant for identity in terms of their appearance, the image they convey, their embodied relationship to the wearer, and the items that are held inside. Despite this, there has been little sociological work on handbags, with the exception of that of the French sociologist Kaufman (2011). However, studies of handbags by photographers (Hagerty, 2002; Klein cited by Perrine, 2011), journalists (Gallagher, 2006) and market researchers (Styring, 2007) have revealed how they are embedded within women's everyday lives, relationships and identities.

The items inside women's handbags provide clues to various aspects of their identity, giving a 'snapshot of the owner' at a particular moment in time (Hagerty, 2002, p. 20). Handbags contain items such as credit cards, business cards, and sometimes passports, which provide literal proof of identity, as well as various functional items which provide resources to deal with any occurrence throughout the day. In addition, handbags contain what Kaufman (quoted by Laronche, 2011) describes as 'apparently useless treasures related to memorable events, emotions and superstition'. Like other aspects of dress, handbags and their contents can function as 'memory objects' (Ash, 1996), evoking powerful memories of people or events. Items which no longer have any functional use – such as expired identity cards, concert tickets, or an old set of keys – may be retained in handbags as a way of maintaining connections to past roles or aspects of the self (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

The outward appearance of a handbag is also significant in terms of the image it conveys, and what it reveals – or conceals – about the owner's identity (Hagerty, 2002). Klein (quoted by Laronche, 2011) describes handbags as 'an expression of style' and states 'a woman's handbag is a bit like a man's car: it corresponds to the image they wish to project.' Like other aspects of dress, the image conveyed by different handbags manifests social divisions, and dimensions of class, gender, and age (Twigg, 2013). Expensive designer

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