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Research Article

A community psychology of object meanings: Identity negotiation during disaster recovery ☆

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Abstract

What do material goods intended for personal consumption mean to community? We use the extreme example of natural disaster recovery in a community to explore this question. Our work describes how members make sense of material objects that transition from private to public possessions (damaged goods) and public to private possessions (donated goods). By blending consumer and community psychology perspectives with our narratives, we employ a three-dimensional framework for analyzing object meanings: (1) material objects as agents of communitas (a shared sense of "we"), (2) material objects as agents of individualism (a focus on "me"), and (3) material objects as agents of opposition (the "we" that speaks for "me" and "us" versus "them"). This theoretical frame allows us to show how different conceptions of identity lead to conflicting meanings of objects within community, and to explain how and why object meanings shift as objects move across time and space from private to public and from scarcity to abundance. We also provide implications for coping with disasters that consider collective and individual identities as well as oppositional stances in between.

Keywords: Object meanings; Community psychology; Collective-identity; Self-identity; Disaster recovery; Sense of connectedness

Introduction

Consumer psychology has a rich history of the study of relations between people and objects (Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Belk, 1988, 2010; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Epp & Price, 2010; Hill, 1991; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Tian & Belk, 2005), and extreme contexts such as natural disaster recovery offer an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the theoretical nuances of these relationships. Tetlock and McGraw (2005, p. 35) posit that "ambiguity about normative boundaries will be most pronounced in periods of social change—when technological, demographic, and market forces create temptations to mix the secular and sacred. Interesting times such as these create the richest opportunities for documenting how citizens balance two clashing goals: (1) to maintain their self-concepts as kinfolk and citizens … and (2) to survive in a world of scarce resources." We use the context of disaster recovery in community—when private consumption becomes a public concern (damaged goods) and public resources are used for private concerns (donated goods)—to advance theory on consumer-possession relations. To this end, our purpose is to uncover object meanings at the community level so that we can explain when and why object meanings are conflicted.

Theoretical background

Identity and object meanings

Put simply, identity is a social cognitive representation of the "characteristics of people as understood by themselves and

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others" (Dittmar, 1992, p. 73). Identity may be understood through the lens of collective identity ("we") or self-identity ("me"). What material objects mean to our collective identity has been explored in consumer research (Belk, 1984; McCracken, 1988). Through a sociocultural lens, we have come to understand that collective identity is negotiated through communication/interaction around symbolic consumption objects and activities (Epp & Price, 2008). For instance, we know that identity of a family may be linked to mundane or shared possessions, such as a table or home (Epp & Price, 2010; McCracken, 1988), and that these possessions are linked to larger group meanings, as when Mormon pioneers used possessions to negotiate group identity and its continuity (Belk, 1992). This sociocultural perspective helps us understand what personal consumption objects mean to collective identity and a sense of "we."

In terms of self-identity, the consumer-behavior literature shows that material objects, and the processes required to enact them, provide self-continuity and self-definitional value to consumers (see Kleine & Baker, 2004 for a review). Objects' self-continuity properties facilitate adaptation, development, and preservation, particularly when identity is uncertain or challenged (Belk, 1992; Bollas, 1979; Noble & Walker, 1997; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997; Schouten, 1991). For example, when self-identity is in flux, through significant change such as migration to a different country, objects may serve to confirm some aspects of self-identity while reconstructing others (Mehta & Belk, 1991). In contrast, objects' self-definitional properties derive from their abilities to help individuals tell life stories, contemplate who they are and what they can do, designate boundaries among people, places, and times, and foster interconnections (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Taken together, this psychological perspective helps us understand what personal consumption objects mean to a sense of "me."

Community psychology

To understand how people make sense of their environments, community psychology simultaneously considers a context, a set of actors, and a sense of connectedness based on shared values, interests, and behaviors (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). Like other relational types (work, marriage, church, family), community relations require emotional cohesiveness and long-term commitment (Nisbet, 1967), yet such associations are fraught with conflict as positions are negotiated over time (Sonn & Fisher, 1998; Wiesenfeld, 1996). One reason conflict occurs is because there are different psychological senses of connectedness operating at one time (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Townley, Kloos, Green, & Franco, 2011; Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Sense of connectedness can be understood through two modalities: communitas (Turner, 1969) and individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2008). On one extreme a sense of connectedness is a modality of "communitas," where roles are transcended and all group members have equal status, as well as an almost magical sense of camaraderie (Bellah et al., 2008; Turner, 1969). In this modality, members are perceived as homogeneous, and the group is not segmented into roles and statuses. On the other extreme sense of connectedness is a position of individualism, in which independence and self-reliance are expected, member roles are clearly defined, people are concerned with "ends" and "means," and status is achieved via distinction (Bellah et al., 2008; Turner, 1969). In this modality, differences between members are desirable and there is no single standard of acceptability (Townley et al., 2011). Community psychologists have stressed the importance of understanding community psychology from both perspectives simultaneously (Rappaport, 1977), but the reality is that one position is usually privileged over the other (Townley et al., 2011).

Intended contributions

By weaving consumer research perspectives on object meanings with the concept of sense of connectedness from community psychology, our work contributes to the literature in three primary ways. First, by considering and crossing boundaries between communitas (Epp & Price, 2008) and individualism (Belk, 1984) perspectives on object meanings, our work explains why object meanings are conflicted in community. This approach recognizes that multiple positions exist within social groups, and does not privilege one position over another (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008; Townley et al., 2011).

Second, our work shows when and how tensions over object meanings shift as objects move across time and space. Previous research shows that the environmental context influences the meanings people assign to objects (Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990); our research shows how those meanings vary based on object movement from private to public (damaged goods), from public to private (donated goods), and from resource environments of scarcity to resource environments of abundance.

Third, our research links consumer and community psychology to provide a deeper understanding of how social groups make sense of material objects during times of environmental disruption, material deprivation, or recently-acquired abundance (Baker, 2009; Chakravarti, 2006). For instance, numerous scholars engaged in disaster research across many disciplines and methodological approaches have called for a better understanding of the consumer psychology issues involved in disaster recovery (Austin, 2006; Bretherton & Ride, 2011; Cox, Long, Jones, & Handler, 2008; Marshall, 1979; Oliver-Smith, 1999; Suda, 2000). We provide implications for disaster relief and hope to stimulate further consumer research on material aspects of disaster recovery.

Research context and methods

Sociocultural perspective and site

Disasters are socially-constructed experiences that occur at the intersection of natural hazard events and social processes of recovery (Oliver-Smith, 1999, 2004; Quarantelli, 2005). Disasters are not just *an* event, but a *series* of events (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993) that occur in community (Bourque, Siegel, Kano, & Wood, 2007). This conceptualization of disasters coincides with the experiences of people connected to Black Gold, U.S.A. (actual name is disguised). Black Gold, a rural town