

**HHS PUBLIC ACCESS**

Author manuscript

*J Aging Stud.* Author manuscript; available in PMC 2016 August 01.

Published in final edited form as:

*J Aging Stud.* 2015 August ; 34: 21–28. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2015.03.006.**Possession Divestment by Sales in Later Life****David J. Ekerdt and Aislinn Addington<sup>a</sup>**<sup>a</sup> Gerontology Center and Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, Lawrence KS 66045, U.S.A.**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 dis-possession 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.

**Keywords**

commodification; divestment; materiality; possessions; relocation; sales

---

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

---

Corresponding author: David J. Ekerdt, Gerontology Center, University of Kansas, 1000 Sunnyside Ave., Room 3090, Lawrence, KS 66045-7561, 1-785-864-0688, [dekerdt@ku.edu](mailto:dekerdt@ku.edu).

**Publisher's Disclaimer:** This is a PDF file of an unedited manuscript that has been accepted for publication. As a service to our customers we are providing this early version of the manuscript. The manuscript will undergo copyediting, typesetting, and review of the resulting proof before it is published in its final citable form. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

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.

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; Crouse, 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-commodification, 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-commodification 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 (Hermann, 1997; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005, Gregson et al., 2007b).

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; Price et al., 2000; Marx et al., 2004). 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 surplusd 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 communities, through health fairs, community newspapers, as well as word-of-mouth referrals. We screened volunteers to be over the age of 60, 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 79 households consisted of 17 married couples (interviewed together), 10 men only (two married, two divorced or separated, six widowed), and 52 women only (six married, 14 divorced, 29 widowed, three never married). The 96 respondents ranged in age from 61 to 91 with a median age of 73. One respondent was Native American, 21 were African American, and the rest were white. Over half of the respondents (47) had earned a college degree. Some households were making their first move in a long time; some had made more than one post- retirement move and so had undertaken successive disbandments. Tenure in the previous residences ranged from one to 60 years, with 27 households having lived less than 10 years in their previous home, 11 having lived there 10-19 years, 14 having lived there 20-29 years, and 27 having more than 30 years previous tenure. A median of six months had passed since the move and our interview.

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 focused 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; about who helped with the various aspects of the moving process; and we led informants through a list of over 20 categories of items (clothes, furniture, appliances, decorations) to prompt further disposition narratives. Interviews typically lasted about one or two hours.

In order to examine experience with sales, we first read through each transcript in its entirety. Next, using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2012), we coded the transcripts broadly for relevant passages, followed by a second more specific coding in order to document themes and patterns. We met to discuss results and focus the analysis on passages where our respondents recalled that they sold things or decided not to sell things, how that experience went, what the proceeds were from sales, and whether that money was important. In the following sections, respondents have pseudonyms and details were altered where necessary to maintain confidentiality for the research participants. Emphatic statements by our interviewees were transcribed in uppercase.

## Results

### Engagement in Sales

We began the interviews with few expectations about the extent of movers' involvement with sales. It happened that one quarter (20) of our 79 households sold nothing in conjunction with their move. This is a good share of movers foregoing a major strategy for divestment. Yet, in the absence of a recent move, a far larger proportion of older Americans does not regularly sell things. Among respondents to the 2010 wave of the national Health and Retirement Study (<http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu>), fully 81 percent of persons aged 60 and older with a recently stable residence reported selling no belongings in the last year via a yard, garage, or estate sale, a community sale, on consignment, or on the Internet (authors' calculations).

Citing some personal or situational limitation, our interviewees forewent sales because it all seemed a lot of trouble; it was not feasible or even permitted for apartment dwellers; it meant interacting with strangers; dealer commissions were too high; and because giving was favored over selling: "I don't believe in selling stuff if somebody needs it." One man explained that his former neighborhood was not secure enough for a yard sale.

You have to understand the logistics of my old neighborhood. . . . If I had set up my furniture in the back yard to sell it, I wouldn't have sold anything. People would probably be trying to walk off with stuff, you know, trying to sneak out the backyard with something in their pocket. A yard sale would not have been successful. So no, I did not sell anything. (Juan King, age 66)

Some of these various difficulties with selling were likewise cited by people who went ahead with sales nonetheless.

Another one-quarter of our interviewees (19) had low engagement in selling for their moves, having sold only a small number of things, typically to friends or neighbors, or to the buyers of their houses. These objects tended to be appliances and pieces of furniture and the deals mainly came about opportunistically. Because these were off-market transfers to people whom the movers knew, several spoke of nominal sales prices that formalized exchanges that were nearly gift-like.

I was just going to give [the cabinet] to her, but she didn't want to take it like that. So she gave me some money for it. You could say that I sold that because she gave me just about the price for it. (Sandra Graves, age 69)

The modest proceeds of these casual sales led several interviewees to say: "I really gave it away." Herrmann (1997) has also reported such token or giveaway prices at American garage sales. One other kind of low-engagement selling was a proxy strategy of contributing items to a community or charity sale and thereby passing belongings to (unknown) buyers without profit to the donor.

The remaining half of the movers had greater engagement based on more extensive lists of things sold, multiple modes of selling, and having mounted multi-item sales either on their property or through an agent (estate sellers, auction houses, dealers, consignment shops) or on Internet sites. In these efforts, people offered every sort of indoor and outdoor belonging, along with automobiles. Their experience dominates the sections that follow about sales competence and possession detachment.

The extent to which people turn to sales should depend on their knowledge and skills but also on the value of their stock of possessions. Taking the highest educational level of the household as a rough indicator of human and household capital, we found that 62 percent of college graduates in our sample had high engagement in selling compared to 41 percent among those without a college degree. Only 15 percent of college graduates sold nothing versus 34 percent among those with no degree. This suggests a socioeconomic gradient in sales engagement.

### **Competence with Sales Procedure**

Movers' satisfaction with sales procedures differed according to the methods that they tried. Private sales to individuals seemed the least fraught of all options. These could occur by word of mouth. For example, one couple started talking to co-workers at their respective jobs, spreading the word, and "we had enough [sales] with just the people that were in the community." Jim Kanaga, a 74-year old widower who would move to a condominium, initiated sales to his neighbors:

I sold a lot of stuff and I didn't even have a garage sale. I just went next door and asked Aaron if he wanted to look at some stuff, to see if he wanted to buy it. The guy was cutting the grass next door and I said I may have something you may be interested in. So I went back and forth across the street.

Hearing of a downsize and move, people also came forward offering to buy things. Informal sales held only positive memories in our interviews. One couple simply left a considerable quantity of things behind when moving, which surprised the new owner, but he made it good. He sent a check and, for the wife, two dozen long-stemmed red roses. We asked if the check was a fair amount? "More than fair," said the husband. "Yeah, faith in people again," said his wife. These positive recollections also convey an element of satisfaction at having achieved "safe passage" of goods to new, appreciative owners (Ekerdt et al., 2012).

Estate sales received mixed reviews. Eleven of our households participated in such arrangements which sometimes occurred after the move but before the house sold. These sales are conducted by an outside party either in the home or perhaps things are mingled with other sale items at another property. By contract, the estate seller displays the goods and settles prices at the actual event. Several of our interviewees endorsed the estate seller's work and expressed admiration for the time spent on arranging and pricing things, the way workers came equipped with canopies and tables, and the thorough clean-up afterward. Burt and Colleen Andrews, ages 79 and 74 who would move from a large house to an apartment in an assisted living community, were very pleased:

Wife: They had that two weeks to come in, go through the house, arrange it the way they wanted, you know, to get it priced and whatnot for the sale, and then they cleaned up afterwards, so there was nothing. We didn't have to do a thing!

Husband: That's the way to do it. It would be difficult to have your own sale, because I just think it would be a lot harder to set up. They had, you know, a lot of extra tables.

Wife: And the staff. And they knew how to do it.

Another woman said: "I could not have done it. I COULD NOT HAVE DONE IT! Trying to sell my furniture on my own." These estate sale enthusiasts acknowledged the expertise that they did not have, and they deferred to it.

Estate sale procedure was also a source of complaint, some of it arising in retrospect from admitted unfamiliarity with the ground rules.

The estate sale was a dismal, stressful trial because the man that I chose ripped me off, in essence. I just really felt like he did not do an effective job of advertising. He had it on a weekday when people that would want tools and stuff like that couldn't come. I wasn't savvy enough to realize that at the time. (Frances Lucas, age 72)

Another woman had not realized that her seller would not display anything that might sell for less than \$20, leaving her to stage a later yard sale for the cheaper items. Jane Ferguson admitted to being "a rookie" about estate sales. She was displeased that her seller pressed to add someone else's tools and furniture to her sale, because "your house is kind of bare." She thought that the sale was held on the wrong days of the week. Because she was required to stay away from the sale, "I have no idea what anything sold for. . . . The numbers could have come out of the air." Perhaps in all these cases, stronger proceeds from the sales might have tempered complaints about procedure.

The verdict was neutral on the success of yard or garage sales. This method seems to have worked well enough that a number of households held more than one in the period before moving. The main drawback to garage sales is how laborious they are: setting up, the time involved. Roberta Davis, who had difficulty walking and would downsize from four bedrooms to one, recalled:

Then I had a garage sale. Well, I hate those—that didn't do too much good. Then I had another garage sale. . . . Yes, two garage sales. And I don't like garage sales!

The kids came over, friends came, neighbors came and helped me mark things and get it set up. . . . A lot of work to get it all ready and marked.

Twelve households sold items online using Craigslist or eBay, and in half the cases the business was handled by children or friends so there was little first-hand comment on procedure. This method was only tried for selected items—a car, a set of dolls, a piano—and with inconsistent success. In two cases, the sellers thought that they were being scammed.

Help from others assisted all of these sales methods, not only online sales. Word-of-mouth news about a move could produce cooperative buyers and offers to purchase from among neighbors and acquaintances. From movers' social networks came advice about estate sellers and consignment shops. Adult children had cooperated in the divestment first by agreeing to take things, and then by helping with sales, or even taking over. The daughter of Debra Stinson, age 90, organized a two-day sale that involved “four people from her bridge club, and another four people from her book club and some from her church.” The absence of help was likewise a reason for not selling. Marjorie Curtis, an 87-year old widow, moved from a tri-level house to a two-bedroom apartment. In addition to selling to friends and neighbors, we asked if she had had an organized sale. And she said: “No, no. I couldn't quite handle that by myself. And with my children all working, and they have children, I couldn't ask them to come up and spend the week with me.”

### Competence with Pricing

In yard sales and in mediated sales (e.g., estate sales, antique dealers), the final prices of things tended to surprise our interviewees. As Herrmann (1997) observed about garage sales: “Sales contain an enormous range of items and few sellers have a command over the retail value of the items they are selling” (pp. 916-917). The one exception in our study was an 82-year old woman, Ruth Ann Barber, who held an estate sale and had herself been in that business. Her pricing acumen was apparent in an anecdote about a furniture item that her granddaughter wanted. The grandmother estimated the estate sale price at \$1,500 and the granddaughter offered to buy it from her ahead of the sale. But the grandmother said no, wait for the sale because it may go cheaper. And it did—the granddaughter got it for \$1,200.

More common was disappointment about the exchange value of things as they return to being commodities. One man thought that he could sell clothing: “But heck, that didn't work.” Eldon Weale, who had two yard sales, concluded this about low return on effort:

Yard sales don't work too good. They used to work real well, but I think yard sale people have a lot of stuff, too. They're pretty selective now. If you just want to dump things, a yard sale is not a great idea.

His meaning, consistent with Herrmann (1997), was that low prices are necessary in order to move a lot of goods. Joyce Leseur told us that her estate seller had underpriced china, silverware, and glass bowls. To other interviewees, the downward price bargaining seemed tiresome. When we asked Gladys and Daryl Staples how their yard sale went, Mr. Staples said: “Splendidly, everybody made out but us!” His particular example was a crystal set that had been bought for \$13.50 a glass nearly 50 years ago. At the sale, “I was asking \$3.00 and



[the buyers] bickered and got it down to \$2.50.” The discounting also demoralized Frances Lucas:

In the estate sale, someone would say, “Can I give you a dollar for this?” and I knew they were hundreds of dollars. I would say that if you have an estate sale, don’t be there. I was curled up in a little fetal position by the time I heard all that stuff.

Finally, Grace Brown felt that her whole collection of belongings was discounted by the estate seller’s decision to mingle outside items into her sale. “The lady came in and she says, ‘You don’t have anything fancy.’ And I thought, well thanks a lot. It’s fancy to us, thank you very much.” In all these stories of prices, we heard no anecdotes about undiscovered “treasures,” items revealed to be far more valuable than imagined.

### **Affective Discounting**

Whatever meaning possessions may have, for whatever reason they have been kept, this sentiment needs draining if the material convoy is to shrink as much as it must in a household disbandment for relocation. The move itself coincides with self-awareness of life change that in turn can obviate the value or need for certain possessions that had functioned as an extension of the self (Belk, 1988). And anything not to be retained or given away and deemed to be salable already has its meaning in motion as its potential market value comes to the fore. In a sequence of relegation, sales are a secondary disposition strategy after first trying to give or offer the objects to others (Addington & Ekerdt, 2014; Ekerdt et al., 2012). “The kids had first crack at it, and then it went in the sale.” “If the kids didn’t want it, and we couldn’t use it—BAM!—out it goes [to the estate sale].”

As things moved from the status of possession to that of commodity, people might salute their quality—“a nice round table and chairs,” “very good speakers” for a sound system. And they did later regret selling a vinyl record collection or an oriental rug. But for the most part, people talked about items that “went in the sale” without much sentiment, reciting lists, lots, and batches of goods. Burt and Collen Andrews, interviewed together, talked over one another naming all the contents of their estate sale. Ms. Andrews concluded by correcting her husband’s recollection, and then reduced the sale items to their materiality as “stuff.”

Well, the stove and refrigerator was sold with the house. That was in the house sale itself. The washer and dryer, though, a lot of the yard stuff, lawnmower, snow blower, patio furniture. You know, all of that STUFF. You know, I said I didn’t need any more STUFF! I got rid the “STUFF” (makes quote signs in air), knick-knacks and stuff.

Notably, a few interviewees recalled becoming emotional in the specific circumstance of seeing belongings of their widowed spouses up for sale. And one woman thought a garage-sale buyer would not respect her grandmother’s religious objects, “so I took it from her cart.”

There was some use of the divestment rituals that ease the parting of person and possession (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005; McCracken, 1988; Roster, 2001). One such tactic is story-telling to pass along personal meanings with the sale item. Abbey Sala, age 80, was a habitué at the auction house where her own things were being sold (“They called me by my

first name”): “And I would talk to the people after they bought [something]. I would give them a little background story about where it came from. Who had it and it's like getting a puppy.” Her analogy to adoption is apt. Other tactics, rather than pass along meaning, instead empty the owner's meanings from salable things. One of the objections to an on-property sale is that it exposes sellers opinions about the seller's taste and the quality of possessions. “To have a big estate sale where all your things are actually laid out on your furniture, and your furniture has tags on it, I think that would be difficult. I think that would have felt like an invasion of privacy or something.” Auction sales have the specific advantage of removing the owner's traces: at auctions “the owner recedes from the selling context” (Cheetham, 2009, p. 318). Five households in our study sent things to auction houses. Auctions anonymize things because the goods are taken to another place, severing the connection to the individual or household (a connection that Ms. Sala tried to restore). Belva Carter, age 83, downsized a large home and was glad that she could auction things out of town.

There's a place near Springfield that does this, they have auctions once a week. They come and they pick up all the stuff that you want on the auction, and then you get so much percentage. They get a certain percent and you get a certain percent. So I didn't have to have one in my hometown, which I DID NOT want. It was too small of a place. I didn't want to have a sale of any sort, so I discovered this place. It was out of town and it was great.

The goods perhaps got a better price in Springfield, a larger town, but they were also distanced there from identification with Ms. Carter.

Attenuation of sentiment can also be helped by sellers' absence from sales of their own things (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005). This may happen by choice or as a rule of an estate sale. Although we heard complaints about the stay-away rule (“I have no idea what anything sold for”), it does insure that objects relegated to a sale will stay relegated and not be pulled out. Staying away forestalls the re-emergence of sentiment. Frances Lucas, cited above, who found the sale prices disheartening, advised “don't be there.” We asked Harold Jones if he and his wife went to their estate sale.

No, we elected not to stay for the sale and that was our election. We could have gone up. There are people from here that went up. I had given everything that I thought of value out of my shop. I was a handyman all my life.

Having said that, Mr. Jones went on to talk proudly about all the tools that he did put in the sale. These were objects associated with his identity, but he had chosen to physically separate himself from their recommodification.

Once things are gone—and the advantage of sales is that buyers take them away—the lot of them can be reduced in the telling to some sum of money. The obvious criterion for evaluating sales as a downsizing strategy is making money. So, if people sold things, we asked them directly: “Was any money made? What that important to you?” Profits, of course, would depend among other things on how much and what kind of material the mover was selling. From our interviewees' replies, the proceeds from these activities seemed to them modest. A few sales totals reached to the low four figures, but one

household realized \$7,000 from an estate sale and another made nearly \$20,000, principally on the sale of extensive collections. The former estate seller, Ruth Ann Barber, claimed to have made \$28,000. But more commonly, people said they “didn't make much,” “it wasn't a lot” or “a little return,” and that money was made but “it wasn't that important.” People were happy to have the money and some applied it to moving expenses or the first month's rent in the new place.

In at least a dozen cases, the response about money was paired with a higher benefit of sales: getting rid of things. “We got a little money from it, and we got rid of it!” “I didn't get much money for [the furniture pieces] but at least they were out of the apartment.” “Even more than money it was ‘do something with it!’” Gladys Staples, who had seen her crystal glasses go for \$2.50, said: “We needed the money, but the main thing was to get rid of that stuff because I know I'd have to end up paying to get rid of it.” After Gerald Saltzman's estate sale, there were unsold things that the movers packed up and brought to the new place.

And when I got here, there was no place to put this stuff. And it was all kinds of weird stuff. Like a chafing dish. I mean, I haven't used a chafing dish in 15 years, maybe longer. So those I now have those in an antique mall in Melrose. . . . It's just not here. That was the important part.

“It's just not here.” Selling had been the means to an end—downsizing for a relocation. Money might be made, emotions might be managed, but ultimately the getting-rid-of was the goal. “Why did you decide to sell some of the items?” we asked one woman. “Just to get rid of them, so I could move here.”

## Conclusions

Our study focused on the practical and affective management of a non-normative but significant transition of aging. In our sample of older movers, three-quarters of the households downsized by selling some of their belongings. In this situation, sellers cannot optimize the market value of possessions as they might have without the time pressure of the move, their limited skills at recommodifying things, and perhaps their physical limitations. Do-it-yourself sales could be laborious, but even those who used agents (estate sellers, consignment shops) nonetheless paid for the labor of selling by accepting the agents' terms and agreeing to commissions. The social relations of possession divestment have been observed in other settings (Gregson, et al., 2007a; Laitala, 2014). Such relations and networks eased our movers' efforts as helpers and buyers came forward. As belongings left the household's material convoy, the attenuation of affect toward things was underway as they were deemed salable and therefore alienable. Parting with things was also helped by divestment maneuvers that remove owners' meanings.

We asked our movers to evaluate their experience by citing the money that was made, the economic value realized by sales. Although money in these narratives might eclipse other measures of value, it did not dissolve them. Zelizer (1994) maintains that there is no bright line between calculative, neutral money and non-pecuniary values. In Miller's (2008) terms, the price of things can bridge values that are irreducible to price. So here, informal sales might close with token, giveaway prices, but the satisfactory emotional etiquette of an

exchange may be the real conclusion. People could be gratified or bitter about item prices because they are judgments about the practical or symbolic qualities of their things. And modest proceeds overall (“I wouldn’t say I made a lot”) could seem a reasonable tradeoff for the desired outcome: disposal. The bottom line on sales may be that their worth is nonmonetary.

This report presents a different view of older people and possessions than is usually conveyed in the literature. Unlike studies of cherished or selected possessions, the positioning of the self in relation to keeping and disposing was not much in evidence. Other reports from our interviews with the 79 households have considered the role of the self in possession divestment. We have examined people’s attempts to place things with others, indeed give them safe passage to new owners, and even find gender congruity with gift recipients—all of which acts to affirm one’s self as agentic and care-full (Addington & Ekerdt, 2104; Ekerdt et al., 2012). In household downsizing, the turn to sales also involves the self and meaning, but sales are more about the management of things in quantity and reaching divestment goals.

Our study has some limitations. First, our observations about selling and possession divestment by elders flow from a regional sample in the U.S. Although possession divestment is a rising topic in consumption studies (Gregson et al., 2007b; Hibbert, Horne & Tag, 2005; Phillips & Sego, 2011), this research has likewise been centered in North America and Europe. The life-course management of the material convoy deserves examination in other parts of the world (e.g., Türe, 2014). Second, we have discussed selling without reference to an important context: the majority of these households were likewise selling their houses. The disposition of this one possession would likewise have involved all of the factors revealed here: finding a buyer, removing identity from the place, and seeing the meaning of a (long tenured) dwelling distilled to its monetary value as property. The concurrent commodification of the big possession and the many possessions requires a more comprehensive treatment. Third, our interviews were conducted during a period (2008 through 2013) of recent economic distress in many communities. Some households reported to us that they were dissuaded from trying sales methods because “the economy’s not so good for that” or “nobody is buying--estate sales are dead.” In better times, the reports from our households about the success of sales might have been sunnier. Fourth, it is probably not possible to fully understand the decision making, gratifications, negotiation, rigmarole, and stress of selling from retrospective interviews conducted months after the events. There would be greater validity in research designs that accompany people through their moving and downsizing process, as Marcoux (2001), Gregson (2007), and Perry (2102) have done.

Can we continue to encourage older people to sell belongings, either for the purpose of downsizing for a move or, more generally, to get ready for future eventualities? Sales engagement is less feasible with advancing age, so advice should not be facile. Selling can be difficult and arduous, but it can be lucrative. And it opens conduits for quantities of goods in the same way that donations and gifts sometimes do. Selling can be encouraged as long as the frustrations and drawbacks are transparent (Hall, 2007) and the goal of “ridding” is kept in view. The material convoy, assembled item by item over a long time, can in this way be dispatched in batches. Although not everyone has sufficient household stock for

mediated sales, they can be efficient, providing that downsizers cede the control over salable possessions to others. Even do-it-yourself sales require the collaboration of others. Elders and sales can be addressed as matters of commodities, buyers, sellers, and markets, but they are likewise social endeavors based in trust and generosity.

## Acknowledgements

We are especially grateful to Ben Hayter for his assistance, as well to our collaborators Mark Luborsky, Catherine Lysack, Jaber Gubrium, Kathy Cross, Gabriella Smith, and Jennifer Van Nuil. This research was supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging, AG19978 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

- Addington A, Ekerdt DJ. The reproduction of gender norms through downsizing in later life residential relocation. *Research on Aging*. 2012; 36:3–21. [PubMed: 25651598]
- Banks, J.; Blundell, R.; Oldfield, Z.; Smith, JP. Housing price volatility and downsizing in later life.. In: Wise, DA., editor. *Research findings in the economics of aging*. University of Chicago Press; Chicago, IL: 2010. p. 337-379.
- Belk RW. Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 1988; 15:139–168.
- Caramanica, J. Reality TV's new wave: Trash picking with a smile. *New York Times*; Jan 8. 2011 p. WK5
- Cheetham F. Out of control? An ethnographic analysis of the disposal of collectable objects through auction. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 2009; 8:316–326.
- Clouse A. Narratives of value and the Antiques Roadshow: “A game of recognitions.”. *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 2008; 41:3–20.
- Denegri-Knott J, Molesworth M. “Love it. Buy it. Sell it.” Consumer desire and the social drama of eBay. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 2010; 10:56–79.
- Ekerdt, DJ. Possessions as a material convoy.. In: Twigg, J.; Martin, W., editors. *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*. Taylor & Francis; London: in press
- Ekerdt DJ, Baker LA. The material convoy after age 50. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*. 2014; 69:442–450.
- Ekerdt DJ, Luborsky M, Lysack C. Safe passage of goods and self during residential relocation in later life. *Ageing and Society*. 2012; 32:833–850. [PubMed: 23761946]
- Ekerdt DJ, Sergeant JF. Family things: Attending the household disbandment of older adults. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 2006; 20:193–205. [PubMed: 17047729]
- Ekerdt DJ, Sergeant JF, Dingel M, Bowen ME. Household disbandment in later life. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2004; 59B:S265–S273.
- Gregson, N. *Living with things: ridding, accommodation, dwelling*. Sean Kingston Publishing; Oxford, UK: 2007.
- Gregson N, Metcalfe A, Crewe L. Identity, mobility and the throwaway society. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 2007a; 25:682–700.
- Gregson N, Metcalfe A, Crewe L. Moving things along: the conduits and practices of divestment in consumption. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 2007b; 32:187–200.
- Hall, J. *The Boomer burden: Dealing with your parents' lifetime accumulation of stuff*. Thomas Nelson; Nashville, TN: 2007.
- Haverstick, K.; Zhivan, NA. Older Americans on the go: How often, where, and why? Issue in Brief, 9-18. Center for Retirement Research at Boston College; Chestnut Hill, MA: 2009.
- Herrmann GM. Gift or commodity: What changes hands in the U.S. garage sale. *American Ethnologist*. 1997; 24:910–930.
- Hibbert SA, Horne S, Tagg S. Charity retailers in competition for merchandise: Examining how consumers dispose of used goods. *Journal of Business Research*. 2005; 58:819–828.

- Kopytoff, I. The cultural biography of things: Commodification as a process.. In: Appadurai, A., editor. *The social life of things*. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, UK: 1986. p. 64-94.
- Laitala K. Consumers' clothing disposal behaviour—a synthesis of research results. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. 2014; 38:444–457.
- Lastovicka JL, Fernandez KV. Three paths to disposition: The movement of meaningful possessions to strangers. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 2005; 31:813–823.
- 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; 6:213–235.
- Marx JI, Solomon JC, Miller, Lee Q. Gift wrapping ourselves: The final gift exchange. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. 2004; 59B:S274–S280.
- McCracken, G. *Culture and consumption: New approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities*. University of Indiana Press; Bloomington, IN: 1988.
- Miller D. *The uses of value*. Geoforum. 2008; 39:1122–1132.
- Miller, D. *Consumption and its consequences*. Polity; Cambridge, UK: 2012.
- Morris BR. Reducing inventory: Divestiture of personal possessions. *Journal of Women and Aging*. 1992; 4:79–92.
- Perry, TE. *Leaving home in later life: Voluntary housing transitions of older adults as gift giving practices in the Midwestern United States*. (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Michigan; Ann Arbor, MI.: 2012.
- Phillips BJ, Sego T. The role of identity in disposal: Lessons from mothers' disposal of children's possessions. *Marketing Theory*. 2011; 11:435–454.
- Price LL, Arnould EJ, Folkman Curasi C. Older consumers' disposition of special possessions. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 2000; 27:179–201.
- QSR International Pty Ltd.. NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Version 10). [Computer software]; Burlington, MA.: 2012.
- Roster CA. Letting go: The process and meaning of dispossession in the lives of consumers. *Advances in Consumer Research*. 2001; 21:425–430.
- Smith GV, Ekerdt DJ. Confronting the material convoy in later life. *Sociological Inquiry*. 2011; 81:377–391. [PubMed: 21822336]
- Türe M. Value-in-disposition: Exploring how consumers derive value from disposition of possessions. *Marketing Theory*. 2014; 14:53–72.
- Zelizer, VA. *The social meaning of money*. Basic Books; New York: 1994.

**Highlights**

- Three-quarters of the 79 households downsized by selling some belongings.
- Different sales methods (informal, estate, garage) had gratifications and pitfalls.
- Sellers' efforts were eased by social relations with helpers and buyers.
- As selling proceeded, sentiment about possessions waned, meanings shifted.
- Emergent materiality and economic value eased divestment from the household.