

## JEWELLERY STORIES: FROM NECKLACE TO AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Bao-Chau Pham

*I would like to thank Izzy, Maria, Robyn and Sarah for their stories, and their trust.*

### INTRODUCTION

**W**hen I met Robyn in our first week at university, one of the things I noticed about her was two dainty silver rings that she wears on her left middle finger. Whether she is cooking in the kitchen, going for a run or studying in the library, she always wears the same two rings. Once during a conversation, she told me ‘I don’t notice that I am wearing them, but I notice it when I don’t wear them. I feel kind of naked without them. It’s just me!’ One of them is a plain silver ring which is made up of two interweaving strands and is slightly too wide for her finger. The second one, which she puts on top of the plain one is a silver ring that is shaped to resemble a band of flowers. I noticed that she wore them every day. When I pointed this out to her I got the following response: ‘Yes, I never take them off, not even when I go to bed! I got them from my mum, dad and brother’.

What struck me about this answer was the fact that I too own a necklace which I wear every single day. It is a thin silver chain with a little, round pendant that has my name engraved on it. It was a gift from my aunt when I was little, but I only started wearing it on a daily basis about three years ago, on the day of my senior prom, when I rediscovered it in my mum’s jewellery box. Whenever I happen to leave the house without it I feel as if something is missing. Earlier this year when I started thinking about the Ethnographic Encounters Project, I remembered the conversation Robyn and I had and decided to embark on this journey to find out why we both feel ‘naked,’ as Robyn describes, when we do not wear these particular pieces of jewellery.

I deliberately chose to include my personal motivation because it significantly informed the process of my ethnography. Initially I attempted to leave behind my personal experiences with jewellery that has meaning to me and to focus solely on my participants’ perspectives. However, my personal experience turned out to influence the people I talked to and the way our conversations developed. I realised that rather than solely focusing on the thematic

findings among my participants, it was necessary to include my personal connection to the topic and to the people I engaged with. This is how this piece of ethnography has become what Ellis et al. would call an 'autoethnography' (2011).

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Like Robyn, Sarah is a friend of mine whom I had known well before the fieldwork began. I knew that she owns a pair of diamond earrings which she wears every day. '[It] was an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday present combined with a graduation present' that she got from her grandmother. In contrast, I would have described my two other informants – Maria and Izzy – more as acquaintances prior to starting fieldwork. We had met sporadically during classes or bumped into each other on the streets of St Andrews. To both of them I mentioned during casual conversations that I was doing a project on jewellery pieces worn daily by their owners, and asked whether they could identify with this. Both of them could, and were eager to share their experiences with me.<sup>1</sup>

Maria told me about her two rings, one of which she had received as a birthday gift from her aunt about four years ago but only started to wear it consistently when she entered university.<sup>2</sup> It was originally her grandmother's and now Maria wears it on her right middle finger. It is a gold ring with a square honey-brown gemstone and a white silhouette that resembles a bust head of a woman on it. On her left index finger, she wears a big silver ring that has strands bent and interwoven to resemble 'a bit of an unusual looking bird'. Maria got it from her mother at the airport in Papua New Guinea, which was 'kind of half my birthday present, half a spare of the moment thing'.

Izzy's pendant was also given to her by her mother. She always wears a black string necklace with three pendants on it; two of them are dog tags which are from two of her dogs who had passed away. The pendant from her mother is a square silver plate with a quote engraved on it that reads: 'Where shall we see a better daughter, or a kinder sister or a truer friend?'

---

<sup>1</sup> I did not intend to only talk to girls, but it turned out that the boys I asked did not own jewellery that they wore on a daily basis. This, however, does not mean that boys should be excluded from this group of people.

<sup>2</sup> Maria wears four rings on a daily basis, but two of them she bought herself. I chose not to include these two as she herself said that she felt least attached to these.

## **SENTIMENTAL VALUE – SENTIMENTAL JEWELLERY**

What my participants had in common, and what I share with them as well, is the fact that we 'feel weird' (Maria) when we do not wear these pieces of jewellery and that we are 'very much afraid of losing them' (Sarah). As a medicine student, Robyn encounters situations in which she has to take off her rings. She described how she feels about this as follows:

*It feels weird when I don't wear them, so, I walk to the medic school with them on and I'll put them in my pocket when I go into clinical skills and as soon as I come out of clinical skills I put them back on. I had a bit of a freak out a few weeks ago because I couldn't remember where I'd put them and I was like "Where are my rings?" They were in my pencil case for some reason.*

The question hence arises as to why we feel attached to these particular pieces of jewellery and why we 'wouldn't misplace it, because [we] always make sure [we] have it' (Izzy). All of my participants used the term 'sentimental value' to explain why they wear these pieces of jewellery on a daily basis. For the sake of simplicity, I will hence refer to these pieces of jewellery as 'sentimental jewellery' on the basis that '[s]entimental value is a quality of objects to which one feels emotionally attached' (Hatzimoysis 2003: 373). What is crucial to understand is that sentimental value is not universal. While Sarah's earrings have sentimental meaning to her, this does not mean they have the same meaning to me, just like my necklace is not sentimental to her. Izzy, for example, described the connection to her necklace like this:

*I am very fickle about what I wear day to day and even though this is not my most interesting piece of jewellery and certainly not the prettiest I still keep coming back to it. It definitely has a lot of sentimental value.*

What can be inferred from this quote is that rather than wearing the necklace because it is particularly pleasing in an aesthetic sense, it is worn because it is of sentimental value to Izzy. Robyn does not usually wear jewellery, so the rings she wears are not 'a fashion statement' even though she does like their appearance. Sarah, conversely, wears a lot of

fashion jewellery depending on the occasion and her mood, however, her earrings are 'more of a sentimental thing' which she wears regardless of the situation.

With these statements at hand, I became interested in how jewellery pieces became imbued with sentimental value. Why was it that particular necklace and not another piece of jewellery? What processes transform an item of jewellery from a commodity, that can be exchanged for an equivalent exchange value (Kopytoff 1982: 68-69), to an object of sentimental value?

### **BIOGRAPHIES OF THINGS**

After having conducted interviews with my participants and having transcribed 17 pages' worth of material, I realised that what made the jewellery pieces sentimental to my participants and to me were the stories that they were reminders of. As Gosden and Marshall have put it, objects 'often have the capability of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected' (1999: 170). Maria's story effectively depicts how we remember things through objects:

*'I remember, I was in a rollercoaster with my brother and my finger jammed into the rollercoaster seat as we were pushed forward and it went into my skin. I don't know if you can see it. It bent quite a bit so I thought I couldn't wear it anymore. My brother had to bend it back.'*

The ring is still slightly bent, therefore this ride and her brother bending it back is a story that Maria will always remember when looking at her ring.

Sentimental jewellery hence has a biography that emerges through the social interactions in which it is involved (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 170). One of these social interactions are, for example, rites of passage: transitions from one phase of life into another. Izzy's dog tags are from her dogs who have already passed away. One of the tags is a vaccination tag from 1995, prior to when Izzy was born. She told me about that dog, a labrador, and how she and her sister learnt to walk by holding on to the dog and waddling along with it: 'we tortured

our dog (...) that's how we learnt to walk, it was kind of cruel but we were children and we didn't know any better'. The dog tag is not only reminder of Izzy's late dog but also tells the story of Izzy's transition from a crawling baby to a toddler who was able to walk. It is worth pointing out that today Izzy would not treat a dog in this manner again. As Bursan has argued sentimental jewellery 'contain[s] knowledge of a certain experience' (2011: 10). An experience that contributed to the way Izzy is like today.

Sentimental jewellery can also remind us of a specific person (Bursan 2011: 8). As can be seen in the way I introduced my participants and their sentimental jewellery, every description included a mention of who had given the pieces of jewellery to them.<sup>3</sup> Robyn sees her two rings related to the people who gave them to her. The first one was from her parents, while the silver flower band was a Christmas gift from her brother.

*I see them separately, that's from my mum and dad and that's from my brother. But I like how it's all my family with me in a way. They'll always be there for me, no matter what time of day it is, no matter where I am or where they are. And they've always made that really clear to me. (Robyn)*

Izzy and Sarah, on the other hand, both made connections to more people than only those who gave them the jewellery. Sarah said she remembers her family, her grandmother and her mum 'because they were there when [she] got them'. To Sarah her family is home, and she does not distinguish between extended and nuclear family as she told me: 'from my parents to my grandma, to my cousins and my sister, they're all just my family, you know?' Her strong connection to her family derives from her constant travelling and moving around. Sarah has lived in Egypt, the USA, Holland and now Scotland. The earrings hence have become a constant reminder to her of home and family to her.

Similarly, Izzy did not only mention her mother, who had given the pendant with the quote to her, but also told me a lot about her younger sister who she called her 'constant companion'. Now that Izzy has moved to Scotland she even painted the quote onto the wall

---

<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that the emphasis on the gift-donor stems from the fact that I strongly associate my necklace to my aunt and that this translated into the questions I asked and how I interpreted the conversations. Maria, for example, said that she did not particularly link the silver ring to her mother. However, all participants made some sort of connection to another person while talking about the sentimental jewellery.

of her sister's room. Izzy 'like[s] to keep the reminder around' that she will be fine even 'if everything was to fall apart'. The necklace reminds her of her family, those people who she can always return to. This also explains why Izzy fiddles around with her necklace in situations in which she 'feel[s] most vulnerable' as for example when travelling, to remind herself that she is safe. This observation resonates very much with my experience. I have noticed that I play around with my necklace mostly in situations in which I feel uncomfortable or insecure, as, for example, during exams. Holding the pendant reminds me of my family, and the security I feel when I am with them. This keeps me calm and helps me to focus again.

What these observations depict is that jewellery accrues sentimental value through the experiences, people and stories that it reminds us of. Through accumulating these memories, jewellery pieces have, in Appadurai's words, 'social potential' that means they can 'cease to be neutral "goods"' (...) and become attributes of some individual personality, badges of identity and signifiers of specific interpersonal relationships (Bursan 2011: 10 cited Gell, in Appadurai 1987: 113). Sentimental jewellery for my participants and I is more than a material object. They have become part of the body, part of who we are and how we became to be the people we are today. Parts of our selves have translated into the material object which explains why we feel naked or incomplete when we do not wear our sentimental jewellery.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

Considering that story telling was such a large part of my findings, I now shift my focus from the thematic exploration to a more methodological approach. During my fieldwork I wondered why my informants were sharing their life stories with me. Hoskins has argued that biographical objects, like sentimental jewellery, are 'endowed with the personal characteristics of their owners' (1988: 7) which is why people tend to give 'introspective, intimate, and personal accounts' (ibid: 2) of their life-stories when asked about them. This is certainly true, as I was able to observe in the case of Izzy and Maria who I have initially described as acquaintances. During each of the one-hour conversation I had with them individually, our discussion about their sentimental jewellery developed into thorough elaborations about their families, cultural identities and notions of home which we had

never talked about before.<sup>4</sup> I would go as far to say that we have become closer, as friends, over the course of the research. However, I believe that another important reason for our thorough discussions was the fact that I offered them my own stories as well (Berger 2001: 513).

Through researching methodologies of doing fieldwork I encountered the literature on autoethnography. This can be defined as an approach that combines autobiography and ethnography 'that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience' (Ellis et al 2011: 273). As autoethnographer I assumed the 'dual interactive roles of researcher and research participant' (Berger 2011: 512 cited Ellis 1998: 49). I hence treated my personal experiences and other's experiences as primary data alike. The purpose of this is to illuminate that my assumptions about sentimental jewellery are not value-free but 'self-consciously value-centered' (Ellis et al 2011: 274). Rather than ignoring my subjectivity, an autoethnography offers me the possibility to illuminate to the reader my influence on the research.

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHER AND PARTICIPANTS**

I especially want to shed light on how my role as opportunistic group member influenced the way my participants perceived me. Opportunistic here means that I was part of the group that was researched - girls with sentimental jewellery - prior to my decision to analyse it (Anderson 2006: 379).

With both Sarah and Robyn, I had talked about jewellery prior to my research. Hence, I knew about their sentimental jewellery and about some of the aspects that were represented by it. This transpired in our conversations as there was a mutual understanding that I knew about their stories, as for example their families, and they similarly knew about mine. Our conversations took place in environments in which we would usually meet as well, such as in the kitchen or in the living room, in order to make it feel less like a staged interview. Nonetheless, what stood out, in comparison to my conversations with Maria and Izzy, was that the conversations that I recorded with Robyn and Sarah were more like interviews in

---

<sup>4</sup> Given the limited scope of this paper, I am unable to include all discussion. Furthermore, I feel that some thoughts on cultural and national identity were shared with me as a friend, not as a researcher, which is why I found it difficult to decide whether to include them into my analysis or not.

which I occasionally asked questions rather than the conversations we usually have. Hence it seems as if Robyn and Sarah perceived me more as a researcher during the recorded interviews. This is an indicator of how my dual role as researcher and research participant to a certain extent separates me from other participants (Anderson 2006: 380).

The conversations Izzy and Maria, in contrast, started out like interviews but became more conversational. Maria later told me that she initially felt that 'because it was an interview [she] felt like [she] needed to talk more about [herself]'. Izzy, similarly would hesitate to elaborate on certain topics by pointing out that they were 'completely off-topic'. Again, due to my perceived role as researcher, the way that the life-stories were told was revised to 'suit the predicaments' in which my participants found themselves in the moment (Hoskins 1998: 6). In order to combat this perceived hierarchy between researcher and research participant (Berger 2001: 507) I, not knowing at that time that this was part of an autoethnography, started telling Maria and Izzy my stories and how they related to my sentimental jewellery. What followed was a greater sense of rapport and turned from an interview into a conversation. When I told Izzy about my personal motivation to do the project and what my necklace reminded me of, we started talking about topics she initially considered 'far off from anthropology'. Due to sharing my own experiences with Maria and Izzy, they perceived me less like a researcher but more like a friend. Consequently, I believe that they felt more comfortable sharing stories that otherwise would have been inaccessible to me.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through this autoethnographic journey, which describes both the process as well as the product of my project (Ellis et al 2011), I was able to better understand my personal experience with sentimental jewellery as well as put it into context with other people's experiences. It crystallised that my participants and I feel naked without our particular pieces of jewellery because they have sentimental value to us. By adopting a biographical approach (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 170) it is possible to explain that this sentimental value emerges from stories, events and people which become intertwined with the jewellery pieces and therefore are inextricably linked to it. As Bursan has said: 'the self is not necessarily located inside, but "outside"' (2011: 12). Doing and writing an autoethnography



allowed me to weave my subjectivity and experiences into this paper, as well as fully capture the circumstances under which my participants offered to share their stories with me.

## **Bibliography**

- Anderson, L. 2006. Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Vol. 35 (4). pp. 373-395.
- Berger, L. 2001. Inside Out: Narrative Autoethnography as a Path Toward Rapport. *Qualitative Inquiry*. Vol. 7 (4). pp. 504-518.
- Bursan, I. 2011. Collecting Memories: An Anthropological Approach to Objects as Souvenirs. *Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies*. Vol. 3 (4). pp. 8-13.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E. and Bochner, A. P. 2011. Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research*. pp. 273-290.
- Gosden, C. and Marshall, Y. 1999. The cultural biography of objects. *World Archaeology*. Vol. 31 (2). pp. 169-178.
- Hatzimoysis, A. 2003. Sentimental Value. *The Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol 53 (212). pp. 373-379.
- Hoskins, J. 1988. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell The Stories of People's Lives*. London: Routledge.
- Kopytoff, I. 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In: Arjun Appadurai ed., *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 64-93.