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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THE MEANINGS OF UNDERPANTS AND OLD PHOTOGRAPHS: NOTIONS OF PERSONHOOD AND POLLUTION IN THE ESTATE SALE

In the estate sale, actors (shoppers and estate sale workers) form notions of personhood and pollution through objects such as half-used bottles of perfume, floral dishes, and family photographs. Actors use these objects to create the gender, personality, religion, hobbies, and occupation of the objects' former owners. The context of the estate sale contributes to these notions of personhood. Estate sales usually occur after a death, almost everything this person has owned is priced for sale, and the estate sale is held within the house of the deceased.

This study draws on Mary Douglas' work on pollution as "matter out of place." In the estate sale, pollution takes on various forms (in association with death and illness, the body, the identity of their previous owner, and physical dirt) and degrees, which affect how "out of place" an object is, as well as how actors react to this object. These four forms of pollution are then linked back to the objects' previous owner due to actors' perceived lack of anonymity of this person. Suggestions are made as to how these forms of pollution extend and refine Douglas' continuum of purity and pollution, and how they link to notions of gendered personhood.

KEYWORDS: Personhood, Pollution, Material Culture, Symbols, Consumption

**THE MEANINGS OF UNDERPANTS AND OLD PHOTOGRAPHS:
NOTIONS OF PERSONHOOD AND POLLUTION IN THE ESTATE SALE**

By

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May 2004

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THESIS

Donna Foulk

**The Graduate School
University of Kentucky
2004**

**THE MEANINGS OF UNDERPANTS AND OLD PHOTOGRAPHS:
NOTIONS OF PERSONHOOD AND POLLUTION IN THE ESTATE SALE**

THESIS

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky**

By

Donna Foulk

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Monica Udvardy, Associate Professor of Anthropology

Lexington, Kentucky

2004

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Wedding and Post-Mortem Photographs: Sources for Notions of Pollution and Personhood



Movie 1: Dottie looks through a box of photographs

Flipping through a box of photographs in the living room of an estate sale, Dottie picks out several that spark her interest: a wedding photograph of a new bride and groom with their wedding cake, twin babies in a casket, and a picture of two women smiling with their arms around each other. The room is crowded. People shove their way through, occasionally picking up an item to examine or place in their shopping bags. Dottie continues to dig through the photographs as a large, middle-aged woman stops and stares at her. “Why are you buying those pictures?!” the woman asks, shocked that anyone

would want pictures of someone they didn't know. "Some of them I collect," Dottie responds, "I collect wedding pictures, things like that." "Oh, I see," the woman says, still looking somewhat disgusted. She moves on. Dottie continues looking. "This is just sad to me," she says, "Every time I do this I think I have got to put information on the back of my family photographs." Digging further, Dottie finds a picture of a quilt and recognizes it as one that someone just purchased in the sale, "Here's a quilt one. Somebody walked out with that [quilt]. It was embroidered. Yeah, see, there it goes. The context is [gone]."

In estate sales, photographs speak to the ideas of both personhood and pollution. Dottie, as well as other estate sale shoppers, feel sad that the pictures are for sale, upset that no one in the family took them. Dottie is sad that these photographs are for sale because she feels that they are out of place, and thus polluted, in the estate sale. She feels that the family, or someone who knew those in the photographs, should have them,

Today, actually, was interesting because I don't find very many photographs at estate sales. I will look through them. I don't have a problem looking through them . . . I really feel they shouldn't be there. I feel someone should have cared enough [to keep] these photographs.

Photographs help shoppers to create the personhood of their previous owner. Personhood is defined as "people's notions of what a human being is and ought to be" (Whyte 1990:108). While shoppers potentially use all objects at the estate sale to create a sense of their previous owner, photographs help complete this picture by offering a visual representation of the person that shoppers create. Through examining the photographs in this sale, Dottie learns something about the lives of those who were in the photographs. These photographs, when combined with other objects, contextualize the lives of those

who owned them. By purchasing these photographs, she will remember something about this person she creates. She says,

It's almost like eavesdropping on someone's life to be looking through [photographs] . . . But since there [was] no family there that seemed to want them, I have no compunction about purchasing them and enjoying them myself because I feel like I'm going to remember. I'm going to see these people. Although I don't know who they are, the two women smiling having a great time together, it's just a wonderful photograph of two women who were obviously having a good time. I don't know who they were, but I've got that photograph now and I'll see that moment again and again.

Through purchasing these photographs and incorporating them into her own life, Dottie also creates her own personhood. These photographs tell Dottie about their previous owner. However, by purchasing the photographs, adding them to her collection of wedding photographs, and displaying them in her own home, Dottie tells us something about who she is as well. Dottie also uses these photographs to think about her own life and her own mortality. She thinks about what will happen to the things she owns in her own estate sale. When she says, "Every time I do this I think I have got to put information on the back of my family photographs," she is expressing concern about her own photographs ending up in a box, selling for a nickel each, in her own estate sale.



Figure 1.1

Wedding photograph Dottie purchases at the estate sale



Figure 1.2

Display of wedding photographs in Dottie's home

In this research, I examine the meanings of objects in estate sales with a focus on notions of personhood and pollution. Using Mary Douglas' definition of pollution as "matter out of place," I examine how actors in the estate sale, estate sale shoppers and estate sale workers, define and interpret these objects. Notions of personhood and pollution intermingle, as shoppers and estate sale workers interpret objects such as photographs as out of place in the estate sale due to their connection to the identity of their previous owner. Other objects, such as frilly underpants, buckets of oatmeal, dirt encrusted lawn flamingos, and the diaries of a 1950s housewife, are out of place due to different forms of pollution. Associations with the body, associations with death and illness, physical dirt, and associations with the identity of the previous owner are all linked to objects that are deemed polluted in the estate sale. All of these forms of pollution are connected to the previous owner of these objects, from the dirt that she left on the flamingos to the oatmeal that she was eating yesterday. Actors use these objects to create a sense of their previous owner.

It is well documented in the literature on the meanings of objects that objects express who we are and what we stand for. In the estate sale, shoppers and workers use these objects to create the personhood of the person who previously owned these objects. The person who owned these objects is not present at the estate sale, as estate sales are usually given due to a death or late-in-life move to an assisted living facility or nursing home. Therefore, those involved in estate sales create this person only through the objects that they owned, as well as the contexts that surround these objects. When viewing an object in an estate sale, shoppers and workers often refer to the gender, age, size, likes, dislikes, talents, hobbies, motivations, religion, personality, life events, occupations and income of the previous owner of the object.

Objects not only help shoppers and workers to create the personhood of the objects' previous owner, they also serve as vehicles through which actors create their own personhood and reflect on their own lives. Due to the circumstance of the estate sale, shoppers and workers become aware of their own mortality. In the context of the estate sale, shoppers and workers often talk about their own life and death. They discuss what will happen at their own estate sale, as well as how they wish to be represented through the objects that they own. The objects that shoppers purchase at estate sales not only tell them about their previous owner, these objects also tell them about themselves. Objects serve as material symbols of their owner. So, when they purchase objects at estate sales and incorporate them into their own lives, these objects potentially express their own age, gender, size, likes, dislikes, talents, hobbies, motivations, religion, personality, life events, occupations and income.

The meanings of objects are multiple. In this research, I focus on two specific meanings in the setting of the estate sale: objects as polluted and objects as vehicles for the creation of the personhood. Actors merge these two notions as they deem objects out of place in connection to the death, illness, body, identity and physical dirt of their previous owner. Whether objects are deemed in place or out of place in the estate sale, they remain connected to their previous owner, as evidenced by the creation of this person by those involved in estate sales.

METHODS



Figure 1.3

This research took place in a mid-sized Midwestern city and surrounding suburbs. The bulk of the research was conducted inside the estate sales, which occurred at various residences within this city. These estate sales were located through the local paper or signs posted on street corners. The research also took place in the homes of estate sale shoppers and estate sale workers. This intensive research project spanned three months.

This research also draws on over five years' experience as both an estate sale shopper and estate sale worker. I started frequenting estate sales over five years ago, when I began noticing signs for the sales on my way home from college classes. Through

attendance at these sales, I met a professional women's organization, The Soroptimist Club, who ran estate sales to raise money for women's scholarships. Intrigued by both the group and their money-raising efforts, I joined The Soroptimist Club and ran many estate sales with them.

In this research, I utilized methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I shopped and observed other shoppers and estate sale workers at over fifty estate sales. I also worked for an estate sale company during the set-up and execution of two estate sales. During these two sales, I conducted over 40 quick two to ten minute interviews with shoppers about the objects they purchased.

In this work, I use an actor-centered approach, meaning that I focus on how actors (estate sale company workers and estate sale shoppers) define and interpret objects in estate sales. Much of this information comes from in-depth interviews with shoppers and estate sale workers. I interviewed eight estate sale workers and eleven estate sale shoppers in-depth. Five of these eleven shoppers are "key shoppers," whom I spent a day shopping with. After shopping, we discussed what they purchased that day. Key shoppers also gave me a tour of their homes to discuss other objects that they purchased from estate sales (see Appendix A for interview guide).

The approximate age of participants ranged between early 20s and late 80s, with an emphasis on those in their 30s and 40s. This is representative of those involved in estate sales. Although those involved in estate sales are about half men and half women, I interviewed a slightly higher number of women than men. When broken down by age and gender, I do not find a difference in participants' responses about notions of personhood and pollution. Therefore, my research deals with them as an aggregate group.

Interviews were either video or audio taped, depending on the method with which shoppers or workers felt most comfortable. I used both audio and video recordings to ensure accurate quotes. I use video clips and frame stills in this paper to illustrate analytical points and the objects that I discuss. I also used photography in the two estate sales that I worked at to better understand how estate sales are setup and run, as well as what objects are sold in the estate sale.

To recruit for interviews, I used flyers, snowball sampling, and previous contacts. I distributed flyers at the two estate sales that I worked at. Shoppers received a flyer when they paid for their merchandise. These flyers included information about my research, as well as contact information if shoppers were interested in participating in my study (see Appendix B for flyer). From previous contacts and flyer responses, I used snowball sampling to gain more participants. I received many responses through the information on my flyers, with very little prompting on my part. Most participants were very enthusiastic about my project. Therefore, it was quite easy to find participants for this research.

SETTING: THE ESTATE SALE



Figure 1.4

Have you ever been to an estate sale when the doors open? We have actually seen them run like mad dogs into a house.

-Estate sale worker

I have seen fist fights about who was first . . . [shoppers] get very passionate.

-Estate sale worker

After the first day, which are mostly dealers who are like ...vultures [turned] loose on fresh meat, most of the people are fairly nice. But not all of them.

-Estate sale worker

I've probably seen rats go through a house friendlier than estate sale shoppers.

-Estate sale worker

I like the thrill of the hunt.

-Estate sale shopper



Movie 2: Shopping in an estate sale

There is an estate sale at 84th and Mission Road, a wealthy neighborhood. A crowd of people gather outside the house. It is a humid morning, and the sun is out. While the shoppers stand in the cool shade under an oak tree in the front yard, items such as crossed sticks, shopping bags, and wadded up bits of trash hold their place in line. Many of the shoppers know one another by name, and discuss the sales they have been to that week. They gossip about other shoppers and estate sale companies. Several shoppers walk around the house, looking in the windows, trying to see what merchandise they want to run to first. The shoppers continue to socialize under the shade tree until about 10 minutes before the sale is scheduled to open. They then make their way to their marker in line and stand there, resuming their conversations.

While in line, shoppers anxiously await the opening of the front doors. "I'm about ready to get in there," one man says, waiting near the front of the line, "I've been here for

four hours, waiting.” “That’s nothing,” the woman at the head of the line replies, “I slept here last night so I could be first.” “There better be some good stuff in there,” the man says, meaning that he hopes to find something to purchase.

People continue to arrive and make their way to the growing line of shoppers in front of the house. Some run so they may be ahead of other shoppers that are walking to the line. Cars park two to three blocks away as the line grows to well over 100 people. This is a well attended sale, as the estate sale company is known for their well-displayed, clean, and quality merchandise. A shopper looks at her watch for the 10th time in the last five minutes. Thinking about what might be inside, she says, “Even after all these years of going to estate sales, it still gets my heart going faster.” She shifts her weight from foot to foot, impatient for the sale to begin. “It’s about time,” she says.

The front doors open. With shopping bags in one hand, and “SOLD” stickers in the other, shoppers run through the house. Linens are grabbed, people are shoved, and porcelain dolls are placed precariously on top of a pile of possessions in the shopping bag. Anything too large to haul around is marked with a sticker bearing the word “SOLD” in large letters, as well as the name of the shopper who will purchase the object.

As people gather more than one bag full, they make piles under display tables near an estate sale worker. Although no one is really watching these piles of goods, shoppers generally honor one another’s heaps of collected merchandise. Shoppers run from room to room, collecting more and more things, until they feel they have seen it all once or twice.



Figure 1.5



Figure 1.6

Shoppers run through the front room. Here they find diamond rings and fine china, some of the most valuable items in the house. In the front room, glass display cases form an outline for the shopping space. The estate sale company brings these cases to display jewelry and other small pricey items. Estate sale workers hover behind the tables, ready to assist their customers. This room slows shoppers down, as they must ask an estate sale worker to open the glass case to see an item that they find interesting. . . Shoppers run to the kitchen. The estate sale company has removed doors from the cabinets so the dishes are well-displayed. Shoppers reach for Jadite bowls and Pyrex casserole dishes amid the color coordinated dishes, tea towels, and other kitchen gadgets on the countertop. They pass the green 1970s stove, piled high with enamelware pots and pans . . . Shoppers run to the dining room. They quickly glance at the dining table, fully set as if expecting the family for Thanksgiving dinner. They quickly notice that the silver is polished and the linens are pressed . . . Shoppers run to the bedroom. They dig through the linens, piled high on the twin beds. Shoppers rummage through the closets, grabbing handbags, fur coats, and gold lame two piece pantsuits . . . Shoppers run to the garage. As well as typical “garage stuff,” shoppers also look through the lesser-valued

objects that the estate sale company moves to the garage before the sale opens. In the garage, shoppers look through common knick-knacks, common pots and pans, videotapes and books . . . Shoppers run to the basement. More lesser-valued objects. Shoppers grab a few things here and there and run back upstairs . . .

The line to pay is long. That's a good thing, because it gives shoppers a chance to look over the merchandise they so hurriedly shoved in their shopping bags five minutes ago. Objects are more closely inspected and prices are thought over as the shopper nears the cashier's card table by the door. Unwanted objects are set on a table or couch, anywhere that's convenient. As these unwanted items are passed by other shoppers on their way to the cash register, they are often re-scrutinized and placed in their shopping bags. Finally, after a long wait, shoppers pay for their goods (luckily, this estate sale company takes Visa and MasterCard), and haul their heaping mountain of loot three blocks to their car. They then run to the next estate sale . . .



Figure 1.7



Figure 1.8

A true estate sale occurs when someone dies. However, they are also given when a person moves to an assisted living facility or a nursing home. An estate sale is different than an auction in that the sale occurs in the house and there are set prices on the objects. An estate sale is also different from a moving sale in that everything, or almost everything, a person owns is for sale. There are exceptions when the family takes some of the things in the estate, or the family or estate sale company discards objects. Due to the nature of estate sales, the items for sale are often antique, or at least older, objects.

Most estate sale shoppers are between the ages of 20 and 80. As estate sales are typically held weekdays during the day, few children attend the sales. Those who have full-time jobs attend on days-off or lunch breaks. Shopping at estate sales can be both work and recreation, and these two blend together. Many shoppers purchase items to resell, whether this is a full-time job or for a little extra cash. Antique dealers frequent estate sales to stock their shops and antique booths. But many casual shoppers sell on eBay as well. Even those who shop for resale often purchase items for themselves, and discuss their enjoyment of shopping at estate sales. Those who shop at estate sales also frequent thrift and antique shops, auctions, and flea markets. Many say that prefer to buy used, “unique” and antique items rather than new ones.

The family of the deceased hires an estate sale company to set up and run the estate sale. The estate sale company either charges a flat fee to do the sale, gets a percentage of the profits, or both. When I ran estate sales, we received 25 percent of the gross receipts. The sale must be profitable for an estate sale company to agree to run the sale. The owner or owners of the estate sale company must make enough money to warrant one to three weeks of work, as well as pay their employees. Therefore, most

estates are from a person of middle or higher income. There are, however, a fair amount of estates from lower-income individuals. The bottom line is that the person must have enough objects that are worth something for the sale to occur.

Estate sales are given inside the house. Usually, every room of the house is full of items for sale. When an estate sale opens, shoppers are free to roam these rooms in search of objects they wish to purchase. When setting up the sale, the estate sale company removes objects from boxes in the basement, trunks in the attic, cabinets in the kitchen, and drawers in the bedroom. The company prices and displays items for sale. They sometimes clean these items, and discard objects that they feel are out of place in the sale. This process usually takes between one and three weeks. The company runs the actual sale, which usually lasts about three days. Usually, at least two estate sale workers run the actual sale. One worker takes the money, and the other worker assists customers with questions, watches them to prevent theft, and helps them carry their purchases to their car. There are often two or three workers to help watch and assist customers. I have been to sales where there were workers in every room to make sure no thefts occur. The estate sale company posts signs on street corners and advertises the sale in the newspaper classified section; the sale is open to the public.

Estate sales are busy when they first open. It is a common sight to see shoppers running from room to room, grabbing objects. This is because everyone is in a hurry to get the unusual and cheaply-priced items. After the first hour of the sale, shoppers assume many of these low-priced treasures are already sold and things settle down. Shoppers

shop in a more leisurely fashion after this initial mad rush. Many shoppers refuse to go estate sale shopping when the sale first opens because they don't like the way people act the first hour. Other shoppers, however, enjoy this "thrill of the hunt."



Figure 1.9

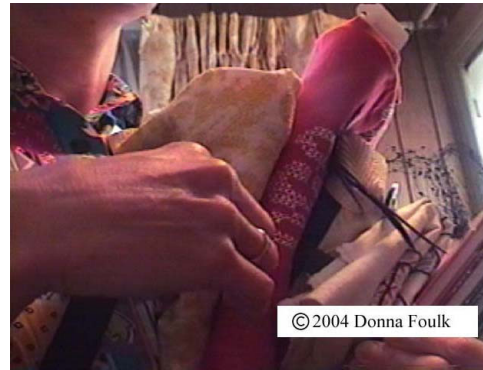


Figure 1.10

CHAPTER TWO THE LITERATURE

This research draws on three main bodies of literature: literature on the meanings of objects, literature on personhood, and literature on pollution. Literature on the meanings of objects includes ideas about the multiple meanings of objects, and how these meanings change over time. Objects can be used to connect with others, as well as express who we are. This ties to the literature on personhood, and how people create themselves and judge others through the objects that they own. Although the literature on pollution does not currently speak to notions of personhood, it, too, has to do with relationships and “the other.”

The meanings of objects: Multiple and changing

The body of literature on the meanings of objects is enormous. I focus on a few select points for the purpose of this research. First, an object has multiple meanings over time (Appadurai 2000[1986]; Cooper 1998; Cullum-Swan and Manning 1994; Mintz 1986; McRobie 1988; Wernick 1997), as well as at any given moment (Carrier 1990; Douglas 1994; Fischer 1992; Gottdiener 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Komter 2001; Riggins 1994; Sidenvall and Nydahl, et al. 2000; Steiner 1995; Watson 1997). These meanings can change due to attitudes of the era and physical alterations of the object. Fields (1996) finds that physical changes in women’s intimate apparel reflect women’s status and attitudes about femininity in American culture. These meanings need not be altered by the physical makeup of the object, however. Meanings can also change through advertising and display of the object (Fernandez 1999).

Gregson and Crewe (2003) find that space makes a difference in the consumption and interpretation of second-hand objects. Different styles of display invite different types of looking. Organization, as well as the location of the second-hand consumption site influences how people interpret the objects that they purchase. According to Gottdiener (2000), space is consumed along with objects. Steiner (1995) finds that the setting where the object is sold influences the meanings of the object and the stories that consumers create around the item. Examining the African art market, Steiner finds that the location of an object (in a house vs the marketplace) affects whether or not it is interpreted as authentic, unique and valuable. Douglas (1994) also finds that context is utterly important to the meanings of an object, and when objects are decontextualized, as in an auction, they lose value. People often try to recontextualize objects to recreate this sense of value and meaning.

The meanings of objects can also change through appropriation (Fischer 1992). In Carrier's (1990) study of how commodities are transformed into gifts, he finds that objects are given meaning through appropriation, through how people use, give, and think about the things they purchase. Objects can be appropriated through the acts of shopping, presentation, and alteration. Carrier finds that an object is made into a meaningful gift because, through appropriation, personal relationships and identities are placed on this object.

Personhood

Objects create, express, and maintain identities. Objects represent gender (Ginsburg 1996; Dant 1999; Kirkham 1996), status (Hocking 2000; Belk 1992; Dant 1999; Mintz 1986), ethnicity (Williams-Forsen 2001), and the self (Belk 1992; Hocking

2000; Marcoux 2001; McCracken 1990). People define themselves through objects such as cars, clothing, houses, and even toilet paper. Objects can keep an absent person present in our lives and alive in our memories. Literature on objects and identity helps explain why estate sale shoppers and workers create an idea of the person who owned the objects that they encounter at estate sales. This will be further explained in the next chapter.

While the literature on objects and personhood explains how we create a person through the things they own, few studies examine multiple objects in the context of the home. In this research, I emphasize the importance of examining objects as a whole in the context of the home to create a sense of who a person might have been.

We find our place in society and make sense of our universe through objects (Baudrillard 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1996). Through consumption, we create hierarchies and rank one another (Davis 1990); objects, then, become status symbols (Hocking 2000; Belk 1992; Dant 1999; Mintz 1986). Through objects and consumption, we classify and categorize social processes as well as other people. In this way, consumption can exclude individuals or groups through marking “in-groups” and “out-groups.” Through the purchase of a new car or old computer, we show where we are in relation to other consumers. According to Lury (1996), “consumer culture provides an important context for the development of novel relationships of individual self-assembly and group memberships” (256). So goods help us locate others, as well as ourselves, in the world (Davis 1990).

Everyday objects often tell the most about us. According to Marcoux (2001), every object in someone’s home, even mundane objects such as brooms and dishes, tell something about the person who owns them. As these objects share a history with their

owners, they can be reflective of their owner's personality, age, and life history. How old is the object? Does it have any remarkable characteristics? Is the object well-used? Has the broom been covered with avocado green floral contact paper to match its green dusting pan? All of these things can tell us about the owner. Our taste in objects such as art and clothing expresses our class and something about whom we are and who we aspire to be (Bourdieu 1984). Dant (1999) sees clothing as an extension of the body, as well as a container for our lives. Objects like clothing signify who we are socially (our gender, class, age, and status). Even objects like digital watches drop hints about our personality (Berger 1999[1984]).

Belk (1992) discusses how souvenirs reflect who we are. According to Belk, "souvenirs and mementos help to *construct*, rather than simply preserve, an identity" (40). This is because we purposefully select items that we feel "fit" who we are. Hocking (2000) examines how Western people "use objects to create a sense of self and to express their identity" (148). Things like photographs and souvenirs can "record and reflect our personal biography" (150). Hocking explains that objects both mirror and transform identities. Layne (2000) also examines how objects make up a person. She examines how mothers purchase baby things before their baby is born and begin to create the personhood of their baby through these objects. So, identity is actively constructed and changed through objects. They don't simply *tell* who we are; they also *make* who we are.

Gender is one example of an identity that is culturally and individually constructed through objects. According to Fields (1996), dress is "both [a] material and symbolic marker of gender" (76). According to McCracken (1990), our culture gives us categories such as gender, age, occupation, and status, which we play out through the

objects that we own,

Goods are an opportunity to make culture material. Like any other species of material culture, they permit the public, visual discriminations of culturally specified categories by encoding these categories in the form of a set of distinctions of their own. Categories of person divided into parcels of age, sex, class, and occupation can be represented in a set of material distinctions through goods. (75)

Through these objects, then, we reinforce gender roles in our relationships. Through examining nineteenth century advertisements, Fernandez (1999) finds that manufacturers promoted sewing machines as tools to enable men and women to fulfill their gender roles as husband and wife. Objects such as intimate apparel, as well, can reinforce women's lower status and illustrate aspects of gender relationships in American society (Fields 1996). Fields is interested in the meaning of the rise and fall of open-crotched underpants in the nineteenth century. She also suggests that the popularity of corsets and girdles, as well as the development of the brassiere, speak to larger issues about control over women's status and bodies. In other research, Ginsburg (1996) finds that male-female relationships are maintained through the act of discretion in hiding feminine products from others' view.

The meanings of objects and the construction of personhood is not all on the surface. Objects can actually be part of who we are. Ancestors are sometimes seen as living on in material objects (Posey 2002). Mauss (1990 [1954]) also discusses how gifts contain something of the giver. Part of the soul of the giver remains with the object they pass on to another person. It could be argued that commodities, as well, contain something of a person who owns them once they are purchased. Certain objects can be

such an important part of who we are that when this object is lost, one can actually feel a piece of herself is gone (Marcus 1992). Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) discuss how an object such as the home “becomes” the person who owns it. It “becomes a tangible embodiment of the personal identity,” (152) in such a way that people sometimes feel that they lose themselves when they move. According to Marcoux (2001), people inhabit things as much as they inhabit space. In her study of the “*casser maison*” ritual in Montreal, where older adults move into smaller living space and divest themselves of many of their possessions, elders constitute themselves through giving away their possessions to family and friends.

People are remembered through objects, whether these are gifts, heirlooms, or souvenirs. This is one way that absent people remain connected to others. For example, the objects that one distributes through “*casser maison*” are associated with their previous owner, and thus the owner lives on through these objects. Hallam and Hockey (2001) find that we remember people through objects because identity is expressed and maintained through objects. Through their research about death, memory and objects, Hallam and Hockey find that the dead and living are connected through material memories. Gregson and Crewe (2003) find that when people purchase second-hand objects, they sometimes create “imagined histories” about the previous owner and the object. Therefore, people can “remember” and be connected to the previous owner of the object even though they have never met this person.

One of the reasons that people are remembered through objects is because objects share their biography with their owner (Kopytoff, 2000[1986]). As objects have parallel lives with their owners, they create and reinforce a sense of continuity in identity.

According to Belk (1992), objects “can give us a sense of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going” (37). Objects form a connection to their owners that continues throughout life, and even after death (Hallam and Hockey, 2001). Whitmore (2001) discovers that the physical existence of an object reifies a life, showing experiences and memories of times past. Stewart (1984) describes the souvenir as a life history and “narrative of the possessor” (136). She sees an heirloom as an object that weaves together a narrative of the life of its previous owner.

However, as Stewart points out, objects do not actually mirror the life of a person. Things do not completely make up a person. Although objects can help to create who we are and contain part of us, according to Stewart, objects are still representations of us to others. Hocking (2000) finds that a single object tells a little bit about a person, but only when the objects of a person’s life are taken as a whole do they represent their owner. An object, then, can never tell a complete or accurate story of who a person is. So, while objects give us an idea of who a person is, they are still only one version of the person. Objects are representations, so we can never fully know a person through their possessions.

Pollution

The notion of pollution has been defined and redefined. Pollution is often associated with bodily emissions (Choksy 1986; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Meigs 1978), and most commonly with menstruation (Green 1997; Norbeck 1952; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Frankel 1980; Khare 1962). According to Namihara (1987), “phenomena connected with human physiology such as pregnancy, childbirth, illness, bleeding, and sexual activity are all sometimes deemed to cause states of pollution, and persons and

things connected with them.” Pollution is also often associated with death (Brain 1990; Chee Kiong 1990; Choksy 1986; Hutchinson 1992; Meigs 1978; Namihara 1987; Norbeck 1952; Whyte 1990) and illness (Frankel 1980; Green 1997). Brain (1990) and Meigs (1978) both see pollution as associated with decay and the “dissolution of the body.” Meigs (1978) and Khare (1962) insist that for something to be polluted, it must evoke revulsion and disgust. Although pollution is often associated with taboos and the ritually impure (Khare, 1962; Choksy, 1986), Leach (1964) argues that pollution can be positive or negative, and interpreted as sacred or taboo.

For the purposes of this research, I use Mary Douglas’ (1966) definition of pollution as “matter out of place.” This definition covers many other definitions of pollution. It accounts for pollution associated with bodily emissions, childbirth, and death. It also explains that physical and social margins are polluted, “Marginal or ill-defined social states as dangerous . . . all margins, the edges of all boundaries which are used in ordering the social experience, are treated as dangerous and polluting” (Douglas, 1972: 200). According to Douglas, pollution occurs when categories are upset. Therefore, when something does not fit in a category, it is considered polluted and out of place. This makes sense for estate sales, for when an object does not fit into the estate sale worker and shopper’s category of “something that should be sold in an estate sale,” it is deemed out of place.

Reactions to and rules about pollution differ depending on the culture and type of pollution. Rules around pollution are created to contain and reduce the effect of pollution. According to Douglas (1966), these rules are not about individuals, but a culture. These rules are created to support morality, and keep people in line with what is defined as

morally right. Pollution often induces a “sense of avoidance, fear, and mystery, and, in connection with these, of discrimination and rejection” (Namihara 1987: S71). Therefore, people react to pollution through avoidance, enforced restrictions and segregation, disposal, and purification practices (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Chee Kiong 1990; Clarke 2000; Douglas 1966; Frankel 1980; Gregson, Brooks and Crewe 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Khare 1962; Namihara 1987; Norbeck 1952; Singh 1966; Whyte 1990).

There are two main types of pollution cited in the literature: pollution associated with death and pollution associated with bodily emissions. Death is often seen as polluting and contagious. This is because death is marginal and causes disorder (Douglas 1966; Chee Kiong 1990; Whyte 1990). To restore equilibrium and order, certain measures are taken. Those associated with death, the family of the deceased and those who deal with the dead body, are polluted and polluting and must go through rituals of purification, segregation, or both (Chee Kiong 1990; Norbeck 1952; Whyte 1990). Objects owned by the dead or used in funeral ceremonies are polluted, and so they are purified, buried, thrown away, or burned (Chee Kiong 1990; Namihara 1987). Spaces associated with death are also polluted and need purification (Namihara 1987).

Bodily emissions are sometimes associated with death because they are seen as “dead” once they exit the body (Choksy 1986). According to Meigs (1978), bodily emissions are polluted because they are associated with death and decay. Although emissions are not always associated with death, they are polluted and polluting. Like pollution associated with death, those things associated with bodily emissions are discarded, segregated, and/or purified. Menstruating women are often segregated from the rest of the society (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Namihara 1987). Objects that come in

contact with bodily emissions are cleaned, discarded, or rejected (Khare 1962). Gregson and Crewe (2003) find that second-hand objects, such as underwear, shoes, and bedding, are often rejected due to potential contact with bodily fluids. If these objects are purchased, they are often purified through cleaning.

There is one type of pollution that is scantily addressed in the literature. Objects can be polluted due to their associations with their previous owner. Clarke (2000) examines second-hand consumption of children's clothing, and finds that clothing is often "re-enchanted" when it is purchased. Clothing is altered and patched and tags are cut out. According to Clarke, this re-enchancing process is double sided, as consumers wish to rid "objects of the 'contamination' of the previous owner" (97) while at the same time value "the 'history' of second-hand goods" (97). In my research, I explore objects that are polluted due to associations with their previous owner. Another topic that I examine is perceived degrees of polluted-ness.

Very few studies address varying degrees of polluted-ness. Although types of pollution are sometimes mentioned as more or less polluting than other types (Norbeck 1952), this topic is rarely explored. There have been a few small attempts to create a hierarchy of pollution. Examining "Hindu notions of purity and impurity," Singh (1966: 136) rates polluted persons according to five degrees of defilement: (1) those who have contact with urine, (2) those who have contact with feces, (3) those who have contact with "a person in mourning, a woman in her monthly periods, [or] a woman after her delivery," (4) those who eat, drink, or have sexual intercourse with a low caste person, those who kill a cow or beat a Brahman, and the most serious (5) those who eat food from or have sexual intercourse with a very low caste person. Brain (1990: 185) briefly

suggests a hierarchy of polluted bodily emissions,

Faeces, menstrual blood, semen, vomit, and pus at the high end of the scale and sweat, milk, ear wax, scabs, and dandruff at the low end. Urine would be toward the high end. The ranking of hair would depend on its source: pubic hair would rank much higher than head hair.

Other than these few small attempts at ranking polluted people and emissions, little is written about varying degrees of polluted-ness.

An object has many different meanings over the course of its life and at any given time. These meanings depend on many variables, including the use of the object, its historical significance, its context in space and time, and the viewer. Identity and the sense of an object as out of place are just a few of many possible meanings of an object that I focus on in my research. Although there are no current works that connect the literature on pollution and personhood, this research suggests that these two bodies of literature are linked through objects in the estate sale. The current body of literature on pollution, personhood, and the multiple meanings of objects does, however, serve as a starting point for my research on the meanings of objects and notions of personhood and pollution in estate sales.

CHAPTER THREE

MISS AMERICA'S PIE PAN: CREATING PERSONHOOD THROUGH OBJECTS IN THE ESTATE SALE



Figure 3.1

To me, it's like a story when you come in here that you're reading, or somebody's life has woven for you. And you're handling all these things that meant something to somebody for a long time.

-Estate sale worker

I was interested in, as things went on, and drawers were opened, and things were gone through, who these people had been, what they had been, what position in life they had had, how much money they used to have, what had happened here or something. And a lot of times you can put together a pretty good idea of who they were what they had done.

- Estate sale worker

Carrying around a pie pan she plans to buy, an estate sale shopper tells me why she will purchase it, “I don’t have one this size. I will use it to bake in. And it has marks; it has been well used, which is fun. It’s probably had a lot of good things baked in it, and hopefully I’ll continue that.” She glances around the room at the other objects for sale, and sees a dress hanging prominently on the open bedroom door. Looking at a handwritten tag on the dress, she reads aloud, “Miss America dress.” “Miss America lived here!?” she exclaims. She holds the pie pan up as if it is a piece of gold, “and I’m baking in her pie pan!”

Through objects such as the Miss America dress, shoppers and estate sale workers create an idea of the person who owned them. Unfortunately, the Miss America dress is only a replica, and the pie pan turns back into a neat, well-used pie pan once I inform the shopper of this. But the pie pan incident shows how the perceived identity of the previous owner affects how people place meanings on objects. It also shows how their previous owner is still connected to these objects and that those involved in estate sales are aware of this.

In this chapter, I examine how and why notions of personhood are created through objects in estate sales, and what this means for those involved. The estate sale is a unique setting where the personhood of an object’s previous owner is created and recreated as estate sale shoppers and estate sale workers discover new objects, combine them with previous knowledge and other objects, and observe surrounding contexts. Through the estate sale, shoppers and workers create the personhood of someone they have never met. Objects, then, are the connecting factor between two strangers.

The objects in estate sales are not only a vehicle for the creation of their previous owner. They also provide a means by which shoppers create their own personhood. This happens when shoppers purchase these objects and incorporate them into their own lives. These objects provide a context through which those involved in estate sales reflect on their own lives and mortality, as well as what will happen to *their* things when it comes time for their own estate sale.

What can we tell about a person from what they own?

Gender is the most common aspect of personhood that is created by shoppers and workers in the estate sale. Even if shoppers and workers do not create a detailed idea of the person, they do refer to their gender when they discover and discuss objects in the sale. They don't merely refer to the object itself, they also refer to its owner. I overheard shoppers and workers say, "She was a collector of a lot of things," "We couldn't figure out why she had so many lamps," and "Look at the clothes, she was so small!" Not only does this show that they construct the gender of the owner, but also that they are not just objects, they are *somebody's* objects. The person is connected to these things, and it is apparent that shoppers and workers are aware of this through the way they discuss the objects in the sale. Instead of, "We couldn't figure out why there were so many lamps," the estate sale worker says, "We couldn't figure out why *she* had so many lamps." Rather than, "There are a lot of things here," the shopper says, "*She* was a collector of a lot of things." By referring to a woman who owned a gold lamé jumpsuit, shoppers and workers show that they are aware of its connection to the person who owned it, and that they are thinking about her when they discover the jumpsuit in the hall closet in an estate sale.

Shoppers and workers create more than the gender of the previous owner. After shopping at an estate sale, a shopper tells me about the person who lived there,

I think that guy was probably a war pilot in '44 and '45, worked for the state of Missouri, lived in Springfield at one point, retired and played golf. He's a member of Southgate Country Club. He moved in the area so he could get to his little golf course quick. [He] lived the gin-based life style with a bar in the kitchen . . . He ran the roost, I can tell you that. [His wife has] been gone awhile, or she was meek and quiet and sat in the corner. I didn't see much in that house that said much about her. But, my guess is that he outlived her. That's the kind of sale it was. She had been gone a few years and sometimes those guys become golfers [after their wife dies]. It becomes their life. [He had] Kennedy [things], so he was Catholic. Bald-headed saint statues, you don't see those at Protestant houses. They don't have St. Francis statues.

From this example, we can see that the gender, occupation, hobbies, motivations, personality, religion, and life events of a person are created through objects and their contexts by those involved in estate sales. They also create things such as the size, age, talents, income, likes and dislikes of this person. According to one estate sale worker, by examining the objects a person owns, "you can tell if they were good people or bad people." Some even create a visual of this person through the clothing and pictures that they find in the estate. One estate sale worker finds a picture of a fiftieth class reunion, and points out who she thinks the woman is who owned the estate. "Her name is Betty. I think that's her," she says, pointing to a woman in a two-piece suit, "I always like to put a face with my stuff."

Personhood is created through both objects and contexts in the estate sale. Those involved in the estate sale use particular objects, such as a crucifix, to decipher the religion of a person. But they also pay attention to contexts such as where the crucifix

is found (in a chest with other crucifixes and baby items as opposed to hanging on the wall) to create other parts of this person's life. Next, I discuss how personhood is created in the estate sale.

How personhood is created: Objects and contexts

Those involved in estate sales draw on two aspects of objects to create the personhood of the previous owner: objects and their contexts. They use objects themselves, along with their condition and age, to create aspects of the person such as their age, personality, and talents. They combine objects to create and recreate a more complete idea of this person. They also use contexts such as the way the object is stored, where it is located in the estate, and the house and neighborhood to create things such as the income level and life events of the person. The estate sale company also plays a part in the shopper's creation of personhood through their arrangement of the house and display techniques.



Figure 3.2a



Figure 3.2b

Figure 3.2: Objects such as menorahs and trophies are used to create the personhood of their previous owner

Objects

People use objects to create the personhood of the previous owner of these objects. While sifting through a closet of hand-embroidered linens, a shopper says, “I think about the time and who made them.” Many shoppers and workers think about the person who owned the objects as they discover them in the sale. They create an idea of their lifestyle and hobbies. Passing a 1960s wet bar in the kitchen, a shopper comments, “he had the gin based lifestyle. Wet bar in the kitchen.” “He was a do-it-yourselfer, fix-it guy. Spent hours hanging out at the hardware store,” the shopper continues, examining the tools in the garage. Objects such as sewing machines also offer hints about the hobbies of a person. One estate sale worker says, “we found a sewing machine, and quite a bit of pieces of fabric, not large pieces, which made me think that they had done some sewing, she and her mother.”

Some objects require less imagination to infer aspects of personhood. Signs of religion, such as a Bible, crucifix, or menorah, are often direct references to the religion of a person. A shopper takes a crucifix off the wall, pondering its purchase, “Apparently she was Catholic,” she says, “there were icons in the living room too.” Habits, too, are easily deciphered through particular objects. A shopper spots a smoking stand and says, “he was a smoker,” then sees three packs of cigarettes, “he was definitely a smoker.”

As well as religion and habits, those involved in estate sales also create the physical characteristics of the previous owner through their clothing and photographs. Digging through the t-shirts in a closet, a shopper says, “she was a big lady. These are all size 3X!” Then looking down at the shoes, “but she had good taste. Look at all the beautiful shoes!” Occasionally, photographs are sold at estate sales. Although shoppers

and workers are not always aware which person in the picture is the person they are creating, they often pick out a person in these pictures that they assume is the owner of the estate.

Shoppers and workers also find out the name of the person they are creating. This is often easy for the estate workers due to their involvement with the family of the person who owned these objects. However, it requires more investigative skills for estate sale shoppers. Two shoppers discover some Christmas stockings in the basement with the names “Grace” and “Dave” on them. As they discover more objects throughout the house, they find additional objects personalized with a “G” or “D” to indicate their previous owner. As she walks through the estate sale, another shopper comments, “it was Edith’s kitchen because I just saw something that said ‘Edith’s kitchen.’” After discovering their name, shoppers then use this when they talk about the person who owned the objects.

Shoppers and workers use the age of objects to give insight into the personhood of their owner. An object’s age helps shoppers and workers to create the age of their owner. They use dated objects to discover more exact dates of life events and interests. Examining a trophy dated 1955, a shopper comments, “He was an athlete. I can tell by the trophy date.” He then uses this date to figure out what year the man might have been born. Later this same shopper finds a wooden souvenir from a sorority spring formal in the 1960s. He then assumes it was a formal that he and his wife went to. Holding the souvenir, he says, “This tells me that the wife was younger.” Objects that are much older than others in the sale are assumed to be heirlooms and are seen as having, according to one shopper, “special meaning” to their previous owner.

The condition of objects is used to create meanings of the objects for their previous owner. One shopper says, “Sometimes you can tell, you can tell by condition of things whether they were special or not.” Objects that are well-used are often described as “loved,” or “special,” and are assumed to have had special meanings to their previous owner. As well, objects that are in really good shape are assumed to be special because their owner “took such good care of them.” One shopper buys a Bernina sewing machine. She says, “That Bernina is in such perfect condition. It was well taken care of, but it was used. So, you know, it was an appreciated object before I have it to appreciate. I think I really like things like that, that have been appreciated.”



Figure 3.3

Table full of orange glass



Figure 3.4

Grace and Dave's stockings

As well as the single object, objects are used in combination to create and recreate the personhood of their owner. When shoppers and workers find objects in multiples, this helps them to create ideas about hobbies and preferences. As an estate sale worker arranges orange glass knick-knacks, she comments, “I think she liked purple and I think she liked orange [because of] all the orange glass.” When a shopper discovers six pairs of golf shoes on a garage shelf, he comments that the man must have really liked golf.

Another estate sale worker combines silver serving dishes and a slew of aprons to create the idea that the owner of these objects had a lot of parties,

I think all of her silver pieces. I just had to visualize the parties she must have had. She had a lot of aprons. She must have really had some nice dinner parties . . . The aprons, the silver serving pieces, all made me think about the parties that she must have given.

The personhood of the owner of these objects is often revised as shoppers and workers discover new objects and combine them with objects already discovered. While setting up an estate sale, an estate sale worker discovers two walkers and a cane. She then revises her idea of the woman who owned these, “I had a picture in my mind that she was healthy. I just saw these [cane and walkers] and I thought, ‘Wow!’ I pictured her as healthy. I didn’t picture an elderly woman. She was 70.” Ideas of personhood are fluid as the worker and shopper encounter more objects in the sale.

Once shoppers and estate sale workers have used objects to create an idea of their owner, they feel that they know this person well enough to say that certain objects do not fit with the person’s personality, age, or taste. Marla, an estate sale worker, describes objects that do not fit with her idea of the personhood of the object’s owner,

There are some inconsistencies in this house. The collector of this [glass] is not typically the collector of Santa Fe, Navajo Indian jewelry, you know. And the collector of Navajo is not usually the collector of Weiss and Miriam Haskell from the 30s and 40s.

Here, Marla uses objects to type their owner. For her, the type of person who owns Navajo jewelry does not fit with the type of person who owns designer Weiss jewelry. Sometimes this mystery is resolved by revising one’s idea of who the owner of the

objects was. Marla, however, uses the owner's family as a resource to resolve these inconsistencies. She turns out to be right, that the type of person who owned Weiss jewelry did not own Navajo jewelry. In fact, it was a different person:

I like looking around and seeing, try to imagine what it was like when this person lived here. When you're in on this end of it, you can quiz the family and find out information. But as somebody who just walks right in the front door . . . Shoppers will come in and see the Indian jewelry, Heywood Wakefield, 40s jewelry, and wonder about the inconsistencies. By being in the estate sale company, you can find out why there are inconsistencies, and find out that some of the stuff was from the grandmother.

As Marla says, estate sale companies can resolve these inconsistencies in objects and perceived ideas of personhood by talking to the family to find out why the person owned them. Shoppers, however, either revise their idea of personhood or create another person whom the objects belonged to.

Estate sale workers often have a more complete idea of personhood than shoppers do. This is due to their contact with the family and their involvement with more objects while setting up the sale. As is the case with Marla, workers sometimes have access to the family, and ask them about various objects and their owner. However, they do not always get this opportunity to, as Marla says, "quiz the family." Sometimes their knowledge comes strictly from interacting with the objects themselves. According to another estate sale worker,

We never know what has happened . . . [the shopper] has no idea what has transpired here, nor do I really, except that I have been through all their stuff and I might have a little more insight into it.

During the estate sale, workers have contact with many more objects than shoppers do.

This is because they dig through all the boxes and drawers in the house. They throw away many objects that the shoppers never see. Workers also see a more complete picture because shoppers do not interact with objects already sold.

Through interacting with objects, both shoppers and workers feel as though they get to know the person who owned them. Eunice, who runs her own estate sale company, says, “We cry sometimes. We get to know them pretty well.” Although the objects themselves are central to knowing this person, their contexts also help to fill in ideas of what this person was about.

Contexts

As well as individual and combined objects, those involved in estate sales also use contexts surrounding the objects to create the personhood of the previous owner. They use what they already know about objects and the person to further their ideas about this person. They also pay attention to where objects are located in the house and the way they are stored. As well, they are attentive to the house itself and the neighborhood in which it is located. Although many of these contexts exist before the estate sale company is hired, contexts are also manipulated and enhanced by the way the estate sale company through their setup of the estate sale.

Those involved in estate sales use their previous knowledge to contextualize objects within their ideas of the personhood of the previous owner. They use their knowledge about the age and use of an object to create its owner. They also use other knowledge, such as occupational knowledge, to figure out what was going on in this person’s life. For example, one shopper combines her experience as a nurse with objects in the sale to discover what happened in a person’s life. She says, “To me being a nurse, I

can get a lot of clues about medical equipment, different things like that, and you think, ‘this person looks like they had a long illness,’ or, ‘maybe they tried to live in a home.’”

One shopper, Dottie, creates the personhood of the objects she purchases through consulting obituaries. After attending an estate sale, Dottie sometimes looks up the obituary of the person who lived there. She uses this to give her a better idea of who this person was, and what their life was like. After buying a Bernina sewing machine at an estate sale, Dottie looks up the obituary to find out a little bit about its owner. Just knowing a few details are enough to create a sense of personhood and satisfy her curiosity about the Bernina owner.

The house itself, including its location, condition, layout and the arrangement of its furniture, is another context that contributes to the construction of personhood. The location of the house affects the perceived ethnicity and income level. The arrangement of the furniture can affect their perceived gender. Also, the condition of the house and objects affect how people interpret the personality of the person as well as the meanings of the objects in their lives.

Owners of vintage stores, which typically carry items from the 1940s through 1970s, often find merchandise at estate sales to resell. Rusty, who owns a downtown vintage store, purchased a large amount of 1950s Heywood Wakefield furniture at an estate sale. He discusses how the contexts surrounding this furniture make him think about the people who owned it:

In that house, as far as just what I thought about [the Heywood Wakefield furniture], it was interesting to see it in that house, in that good of condition, and that many pieces of it in the same place, you know. As far as thinking goes [the furniture] makes me think about those people in that time and they bought that

furniture and they kept such good care of it through all these years. And while a lot of things the family changed around it, because a lot of other things were updated items, that [Heywood Wakefield furniture] stayed the same. So, they must have really loved the stuff. When they bought it, it was probably a big deal that they got it. They probably really enjoyed it over the years.



Figure 3.5a



Figure 3.5b

Figure 3.5: Heywood Wakefield furniture in estate sale (Figure 3.5a) and Rusty's shop (Figure 3.5b)

In this case, the home itself, as well as the age and condition of the objects within it, affect what Rusty thinks about the owners of the furniture.

How objects are stored affects perceived meanings of the objects and life events of their owner. According to an estate sale worker,

There would be occasions where there were these things that you would come across things that you knew were bad memories. And I don't know how to describe that. It could have been a death, it could have been a child's death, or something that. It was clearly, at least to me it was clear, that there was some negativity to these items by the way they were kept, stored, or something.

This worker goes on to say that a lot can be inferred from the way objects are stored. He gives an example of some baby items that he found in a sale:

There were always baby items in most estate sales. Baby booties, or something from their children's infancy. I can remember one, specifically, where they were

stored, how they were stored. They were stored in a little chest in what would have been the master bedroom closet, which is not generally where I would find [baby booties]. I do find that people are somewhat creatures of habit about storing items. This was in a little chest with several crucifixes and there was clearly something negative about this. I would suspect, which I like to do, to try to figure out what happened here, that it was probably an infant death. I find out a lot about people just by going through their lives. How people store their items kind of tells who they are.

Where and how objects are located in a house is used as an insight into the personhood of the owner of the objects. Not only does the manner in which they are stored affect these interpretations, but so does the room in which they are located.

The location of an object within a house helps people to imagine who owned them. Different rooms and areas in the house are often assigned gender, and therefore the person who owns the object in that room is assigned the same gender. For example, when one shopper enters the garage and approaches the tools and workbench, he comments, “This is a man’s place. Yes, this is definitely not where the ladies hung out.” He then talks about the tools in reference to the man who owned them. Shoppers and workers also discuss spaces such as “masculine” and “feminine” bedrooms. One estate sale worker discusses gloves in terms of their location in the house, and therefore who they belonged to:

There were gloves galore. I’ve never seen, short of a department store, I’ve never seen so many gloves . . . She had one whole drawer upstairs in the dressing table dresser just filled with gloves. Then we found more in a dresser downstairs. They must have been her mother’s because that was her mother’s bedroom.

Here, the estate sale worker thinks about the objects as belonging to different women due to their placement in the house. The location of the object within the house is used as a

tool to assist shoppers and workers in their creation of the person who previously owned these objects. However, these contexts do not always surround the previous owner. The estate sale company plays a big part in creating contexts which affect how personhood is interpreted by estate sale shoppers.

Estate sale companies' display techniques affect interpretations of personhood in two ways: through personalizing objects with informative tags and through the setup of the estate sale. Some estate sale companies go to great lengths to organize, clean, and rearrange the house. While this is often done to increase sales or uphold the reputation of the estate sale company, it also affects the customers' interpretations of the person who lived there. At one estate sale, a two-story house with sparse furnishings is given on just the first floor. This necessitates the rearrangement and recreation of the space in the sale. Therefore, the estate sale company transforms a library into a masculine bedroom, and rearranges the furniture in the other downstairs bedroom to create a feminine space. This affects how shoppers discuss the objects in reference to the person. They refer to "her" things or "his" things depending on which room these objects are placed in.

"Needlepoint by grandmother," the shopper reads the sign out loud. This sign indicates that grandmother needle-pointed the chair cushions that lay, delicately displayed, across one of the twin beds. By personalizing these chair cushions and letting the shopper know who made them, the estate sale company adds to shoppers' creations of the owner of the objects. An estate sale worker tells about the cushions:

I wanted them to know that she did all the needlepoint. Those weren't store-bought, you know . . . When I go to an estate sale [as a shopper], there's some sales that I'd like to know the background of the item, or is there anything special about it. So, sometimes when we price a sale, if I have anything historical about

it, I'll print it on, you know not a lot, but I'll do something. But I wanted to, because the grandmother, whenever I knew that she had needle-pointed something, we'd put it on there.

Here, the estate sale worker expresses the desire to know the history of item. She wants to know something about the person who owned it, and so she passes that information on to her customers. This desire to know the history of the object explains something about why shoppers and workers construct personhood through objects in estate sales.



Figure 3.6

“Needlepoint by grandmother”

Why personhood is constructed through objects

Shopping or working at an estate sale is a bit like a game. According to one shopper, “it’s like solving a puzzle.” People use objects and contexts as clues to solve the puzzle of personhood. Both shoppers and workers are curious about the lives of other people. How did they live? What did they do with their life? And sometimes, how did they die? Answering these questions and solving the puzzle of what a person was like is an enjoyable part of estate sales. In addition to enjoyment, though, these questions once

again lead back to the idea that objects are a piece of the person. In estate sales, personhood is constructed due to this “game” element, due to curiosity, and due to the connection between people and objects. Personal interest in certain objects and the nature of the estate sale also contribute to this construction. I have already told the answer to the mystery of personhood (who the person is, age, personality, occupation, interests . . .) as well as how the mystery is solved (examining contexts and objects). Now I provide the motives.

The nature of the estate sale

Estate sales . . . give me that behind the scenes look at [people’s] lives. You don’t just get on the surface. At the estate sales, it’s kind of like dirty laundry. All of this stuff that has to come out.

This shopper expresses how the nature of an estate sale lends itself to the interpretation of people’s lives. Estate sales give “behind the scenes” intimate portraits of a person’s life through the objects they own. Estate sale workers see everything, or almost everything, a person owns, from their lingerie drawer to their food cabinet. An estate sale worker says, “It’s just interesting to know what the history behind, I mean you’re invading somebody’s space, you know? And so, I want to know . . . about the people.” Being in the house, looking at these objects, shoppers and workers often think about what it was like when the person was living here, using these things.

The nature of the estate sale is one that people are shopping and working in someone’s house. Dottie, a shopper, describes objects in estate sales as “in context” because they are in their owner’s house, among their other possessions. For her, objects, their meanings, and their previous owner are all tied up in this space. In the house,

objects are “at home.” Dottie attributes the nature of estate sales to the connection between the object and its owner:

I think it has a lot to do with having gone through the house, and somehow feeling some kind of a, I don’t know, not attachment, but seeing where it came from, it’s environment, where it was found.

Being in the house and going through objects “in context” affects how people think about the objects. Because of this link between the space, the object, and the person who lived there and owned these things, the nature of estate sales is connected to why shoppers and workers create the personhood of the previous owner.

Object intrigue

When shoppers and workers discuss objects and personhood, they are more likely to link the two when they are personally intrigued by the object. Personally intriguing objects are ones that are unusual or just appealing to the individual. A shopper found an autographed photograph of Marilyn Monroe in an attic years ago. When discussing this object, he also thinks about who owned it,

We’ve found some great things that people aren’t going to find everyday. [We] found an autographed Marilyn Monroe [photograph] once. It was pretty amazing. [We] got it at a . . . sale for a dollar. [It was] up in the attic. This woman was a ballerina, I think, when she was younger, in [this city].

Alice, a shopper, tries on a long fur coat at a sale. Really interested in the coat, she thinks about its previous owner, “I did think about who was she, and where did she buy it, and I did think about the person.” Another estate worker discusses her interest in jewelry, fabric and artwork:

It has a definite energy to it, we’re talking about the jewelry. . . It was obviously

Grandmother's or Mother's, handed down from somewhere. And the sense about it is it has an energy about it. I always think, 'Oh, when did they wear that? Who did they entertain when they were sitting at dinner and they all used to dress up so meticulously and wear all these beautiful brooches and jewels and everything.' There's something about that that really moves me.

Interviewer: Why do you think about that for the jewelry and not for other things?
I probably think about, like fabric I do, artwork I do. I always wonder the meaning behind the artwork and where did it come from if I like the artwork.

Her interest in the object causes her to think about who owned it. She thinks about the artwork's owner if she likes the work. She thinks about the jewelry because it interests her, it "moves" her. Personal interest in an object results in interest in the previous owner and the creation of who they were and how they interacted with this object.

"I like history and people"

Objects at estate sales are often unique and antique, or at least of an older stock. So, people are curious about the history of these items. Since the history of an object is tied in with the history of its owner, shoppers and workers want to know about both. Shoppers remember these stories, and these people, years later and often relay this information when they talk about the item.

According to an estate sale worker, knowing something about the person and the background of the object "adds to the emotional value" of the object. Many shoppers and workers talk about how much they enjoy knowing the history of an object, including who owned it. One shopper says, "If you know the history [behind an object] it's even more interesting and special." An estate sale worker tells her customers the history behind an object because she is interested in the history herself, "Maybe because I like to know, I think somebody else might like to know a little history behind something." Since the

history of an object is tied up with the history of their owner, history and personhood go hand in hand.

“It’s more than going and buying. It’s like solving a puzzle” :
Constructing personhood as a game

Part of the enjoyment of an estate sale is to see what people own. Shoppers and workers act as detectives in estate sales. Edith, a shopper, describes it as solving a mystery, “[Estate sales are] interesting. It’s like solving a mystery. When you walk in you don’t know about people, and you learn where they traveled, what they were like.” She goes on to say,

[I am] not just going with the idea of buying something, but [also] learning something about these people, and they used these things, what kind of people they were. Maybe that’s not the overriding thing, but that’s the fun thing for me. You’re learning something about the way these people lived their lives.

Estate sale workers, as well, enjoy piecing together the parts of a life:

I would make it a little game [to find out] if they worked outside of the home, what type of person they were. Which goes back to my costuming a little bit, because these are the same questions I ask about a character. I have to know who they are, how much money they had, what age they are, where did they live. It kind of stems from that, but I can create this sort of character in my mind, who this person was, if they baked, if they didn’t bake, if they liked to cook, if they sewed, or whatever it was. Were they card players? Do we really need 600 boxes of Kleenex in the basement, or will 400 be enough? I loved it.

As we can see, solving the mystery of what a person was like through their possessions is a type of game that shoppers and estate sale workers alike enjoy in estate sales. While many shoppers feel that it is too nosy to ask about the situation, they satisfy their

curiosity about the person, the objects, and their history through viewing the objects and using their imaginations.

Implications for actors

Now that we know how and why personhood is constructed in estate sales, we examine the implications of this activity for those involved. It has been established that objects are a means by which people judge one another and express who they are. This study shows that this process continues even after death. Objects are connected to their owner in such a way that they continue to make up the life of the person whether this person is present or absent. Objects not only make up the personhood of their previous owner, but also the personhood of those who interact with these objects. In estate sales, shoppers and workers also use objects to reflect on their own lives and as a means to create who they are as a person.

Mementos of friends and neighbors

Neighbors and friends often attend sales to purchase a piece of the person that they knew. For them, all the objects in a sale are pieces of their friend or neighbor. Referring to shoppers purchasing objects in the estate sale, a neighbor comments, “[I] see little pieces of them going all over the place.” For this neighbor, everything, even the cups sitting on the kitchen counter for a dollar, remind her of the woman who died: “I remember all these things [people are buying] and where they were in the house . . . I remember the backyard, kids playing back there, the cups they drank out of.” For friends and neighbors, these objects are purchased to remember the person that they knew. However, only a very small percentage of estate sale shoppers attend sales to

purchase a memento of someone they knew. Sometimes objects are purchased as souvenirs of the famous.



Figure 3.7

“The cups they drank out of”



Figure 3.8

“Little pieces of them going all over the place”

Souvenirs of famous people

On rare occasion, there is an estate sale of someone famous. In this case, shoppers often purchase objects due to their connection to their previous owner. There was a local sale of the James A. Reed estate. James A. Reed was a U.S. Senator who ran against Roosevelt for president in 1932. Many of the things at this estate sale were bought due to their connection with this man. This connection affects how people think about their objects, and how a famous person remains connected to the object long after it ceases to be theirs. Although objects are not always purchased by shoppers as a souvenir or memento of a person, they still use these objects to evaluate the person as well as reflect on their lives when using or talking about the objects

Judging and reflecting

People use objects to judge the person who owned them. In the estate sale, shoppers and workers pass judgment on people they never knew through examining the

objects they owned. According to an estate sale worker,

People love going through people's stuff and seeing how people lived, and what people had, and I'm not sure they always do it in a friendly way. I think they kind of do it in a little holier than thou way to see, to see how people lived and died sometimes, how they cared for their house. There's a lot of critical things too, and I think that maybe a little bit [of that is because] a certain generation of people that were taught to keep your house a certain way . . . You will be judged by them. So when you go in and see someone's house that is not in perfect order, that may be a little bit of that dig.

People, then, are judged by the objects they own as well as the contexts surrounding these objects, such as the condition of both the house and the items within it.

By looking at someone's objects, shoppers and workers evaluate the life of the person who owned them, and decide whether or not they like them. Shoppers and workers often like the owners of objects when they feel that they have common tastes or values. Elsa, an estate sale worker, comments about the owner, "[she is the] kind of person I would have liked to have known." Elsa goes on to explain that she would like the woman because she likes what the woman owned and appreciates the way she cared for her possessions, "look at the condition of the furniture. Everything is pristine." Another shopper, Veda, enjoys collecting kitschy items, and comments about owners that she feels a commonality with, "when people have such crazy houses, like stuff like that we have, you would think that they were people that you could get along with."

Shoppers remember where objects come from, and something of who owned them. When they use these objects and discuss them with others, they refer to the previous owner. Coming back the second day of the sale to shop some more, Sunny talks about the silverware she purchased from the sale, "When I used the silverware last night,

I thought [the woman who owned them] would be glad someone was enjoying them.”

Another shopper purchases a vintage metal cabinet from an estate sale. Remembering who owned this object, she says, “I remember the woman whose estate sale this was. [She] was a teacher and she lived by herself.” While people use objects in estate sales to reflect on the person who owned them, they also employ them to reflect on their own lives.



Movie 3: The teacher's cabinet

The personhood and lives of shoppers and workers

As a result of being involved in estate sales, people clean out their attics, redo their carpet, distribute part of their inheritance, and reflect on what is important in their own lives. The objects in an estate sale, as well as the event itself, cause people to reflect on their own mortality. They put themselves in place of the person who owned the estate, and think of their lives in terms of what is going on at the estate sale. As well as making changes and reflecting, shoppers also create their own personhood through purchasing

objects at estate sales that they incorporate in their own lives.

Cleaning out the garage

Since estate sales usually occur when someone dies, the owner of the objects has no say in what is appropriate to sell, and how they want their lives to be represented through the objects that they own. Shoppers and workers recognize this, and make changes in their own lives based on their experiences in estate sales. When shopping at a sale, Edith purchases a stack of books, not realizing that there is a 1950s sex book stuck in the pile. She says that the man who owned it would have been very embarrassed that others knew he had that book. She then thinks about having the book in her own life, and what this would mean if others saw an old sex book on her shelf. Thinking about what will happen in her own estate sale, Edith reflects that the book is not something by which she wants others to judge her, so she gets rid of it. Those involved in estate sales often reflect on what will happen at their own estate sales, and how they will be presented to those who shop at it.

The mass of objects at estate sales also causes people to think about what they own, what they really need, and what is important in their lives. This often means that they make bags of things to donate, have a garage sale, or divvy up the objects by which they want others to remember them. Marla, an estate sale worker, tells about the things she got rid of after working in estate sales:

I took the things that had sentimental value and put them in a storage facility. Sold everything else, everything else, and just said, 'I don't want to be a part of things.' [I] gave my children the opportunity to have whatever they want of my things now.



Figure 3.9a



Figure 3.9b

Figure 3.9: The mass of objects at estate sales makes people think about the things they own.

After being involved in estate sales, people often make changes in their own lives, like Marla did when she got rid of her things. Part of the reason people clean out their garages and make changes in their lives is because estate sales make them think about their own mortality.

Mortality

Thinking about his own mortality, one shopper says that going to estate sales “makes me think about when I’m gone, who’s going to deal with it, and who’s going to go through [my possessions].” Estate sales usually occur when someone dies, so it makes people more aware of their own life and approaching death. Another shopper says,

[Estate sales make me think] of [my] own mortality. If you think, ‘oh I will do that someday. I will get to that,’ and in the meantime then you waste your time doing things that aren’t really worth your time, you never get moving in that direction. Then at the end of your life somebody comes and disposes of all your stuff and your life is over. You don’t have any more time to do those things.



Movie 4: Estate sales and mortality

Like Edith and the sex book she discovered, this recognition of one's own mortality goes hand in hand with thinking about what will happen at one's own estate sale. While walking through one estate sale, a shopper sees underwear and bras strewn across a bed. Embarrassed by this and thinking about her own estate sale, she says, "I just hope they don't put my bras on the bed." Later, when I ask her what she thinks about as she walks around the estate sale, she says, "One thing that I think is, 'Oh my gosh, am I going to have this much stuff at my house?'"



Figure 3.10

Underwear and bras on the bed



Figure 3.11

Souvenir plates

Creating own personhood

Shoppers at estate sales not only create the personhood of the previous owner of the objects and think about their own mortality, they also create their own personhood through purchasing these objects. Edith buys souvenirs from around the world at estate sales to express a part of herself that wishes to see these places,

That's the other thing that intrigues me about estate sales because a lot of times you see souvenirs and evidence that people have traveled a lot. And I have never been able to travel outside this country and I would love to. But it's just fascinating to see how many places some people have been able to go in the world. They've been to Russia and England, and Scandinavia and the Far East. Just, it really blows me away. So, sometimes I'll buy their souvenirs. [I] kind of think, 'well I'll never get to go there, but I can enjoy this little bit of whatever they brought back from a trip.'

Edith also uses the objects she purchases at estate sales to create and recreate who she is and what she likes. She describes this as "trying on" objects:

Maybe you can try on a lot of different things at an estate sale . . . when I say try on, it's just kind of that way of feeling, 'what is it that I really like?' I like everything, or I like a certain style, I only like a certain era or that sort of thing. So, I've gotten a little more spread out, in terms of liking things.

Many shoppers "try on" objects when they think about whether or not the object is consistent with who they are. Another shopper examines a fancy beaded purse sitting on a bed, trying to decide if it is "her" or not. After holding it up and talking about it for awhile, she sets it back on the bed and says, "I'm trying to decide if I'd actually carry it. Black is more my color. Black goes with everything." Although objects in estate sales are

used to create the personhood of their previous owner, shoppers and workers also use these same objects to create and express their own personhood.



Figure 3.12a



Figure 3.12b

Figure 3.12: We “try on” objects to see if they fit who we are

Conclusions: “We get to know them pretty well”

Although we get to know the person who owned the objects in an estate sale, we also get to know ourselves pretty well through these things. Bakelite handled cake cutters and a roll of half-used 1970s optical-illusion wallpaper tell us something about the person who owned them. When we purchase the wallpaper and hang it behind our tiki bar in the basement, it tells us something about ourselves as well. Through combining objects with their contexts, we satisfy our curiosity for how other people lived and what they were like. We then use these objects to judge and remember this person, as well as reflect and create who we are and what is important in our own lives. Through shopping and working in estate sales, people feel they get to know the person who owned these objects. However, they acknowledge that they can never fully know this person. Although objects tell something about who we are, they can never tell the complete story. One estate sale

worker acknowledges that we are more than the things we own,

There is a profound sadness about the fact that someone has collected these possessions all of their lives and then they go to their grave and their family sells it all off . . . I learned as a result of this that you are not your things. If you ever become your things you'll be lost because somebody is going to get rid of all your things. I saw this fabulous play called 'Somebody done run off with all my stuff' . . . Everything that you acquire in life, somebody's going to get rid of at some point when you are not here to enjoy it any longer.

We are not our things, nor do our things actually become us. Things are symbols of a person. According to Stewart (1984), things are mere *representations* of who we are. Therefore, in estate sales, those who create a person through their objects never get the full picture of who this person was. Even while estate sales show us a fairly complete picture of the objects that make up a life, we are still left with gaps. We still do not know what they meant to their owner. Shoppers and workers acknowledge that their ideas about the person are creations. As one shopper says,

So, I know a lot of things that I attach to objects are figments of my imagination because there's no way to know that that's what it is. But it's what makes things fun for me. If it's a story I'm telling myself, I don't care [laughs].

As this shopper expresses, whether the story is true does not matter. But the fact that shoppers and workers create personhood in estate sales shows that there is a connection between people and objects.

In this study, I examine how people create personhood through objects and their contexts in a different way than previous studies on the subject. Many studies examine objects singly, or in combination with the actual person who owns them. Those involved in estate sales, however, create personhood through combining objects and the contexts

that surround them. The house itself as a setting for these objects is often ignored in the literature, and is an important context that adds to this creation. The literature on personhood and objects does not emphasize the importance of these contexts to the creation of personhood, especially when the person is absent.

There is also a link between personhood and pollution that has been little explored in the literature. As will be shown in the next chapter, shoppers and workers see objects in the estate sale as polluted in connection to their previous owner. Underwear and stockings, for example, are polluted because they have been worn by this person. Walkers and medical equipment are polluted in association with the death of this person. After creating an owner of the objects that they see, shoppers and workers then refer back to this person when they deem objects as polluted.

Estate sale shoppers and workers create a notion of personhood through the objects in an estate sale. They create the gender, personality, size, hobbies, interests, class, religion, hopes, and desires of the owner of these objects. They create their own memories of this person through their possessions. Memories, however, are only necessary when the person or experience is absent (Hallam and Hockey, 2001). The difference in the estate sale is that most of the shoppers and workers never knew this person directly. However, they are still connected to this person through these objects. By viewing or purchasing objects in sales, shoppers and workers think about and create their owner. Rather than meeting their owner, then, personhood in estate sales is created only through the heirlooms and mementos, dishes, diaries, and toy fire trucks that a person has collected throughout their life.



Figure 3.13

CHAPTER FOUR

ELECTRIC MASSAGERS AND MOTH EATEN HATS: NOTIONS OF POLLUTION IN THE ESTATE SALE



Figure 4.1

I guess it's just too familiar. It's like something that was too close to another person that was really a stranger. It's not hard like this [plate], you can wash it.

-Estate sale shopper, discussing why she does not buy pillows at estate sales

One thing that you see sometimes in sales is family photographs. I know there's a market for those, but sometimes it doesn't seem right that they are there. It's sad that no one wants them, and they end up in a sale.

-Estate sale shopper

Underpants, pillows, medical equipment, diaries, and family photographs: these are a few objects that estate sale shoppers and estate sale workers consider out of place, and thus polluted, in estate sales. The entire estate sale can also be seen as out of place in that people are shopping in someone's home and digging through their attic and dresser

drawers. Objects themselves can be interpreted as polluted in four ways: as out of place due to associations with death and illness (objects such as medical equipment), as out of place due to physical dirt (such as cobweb covered televisions), as out of place due to associations with the body (such as underpants), and as out of place due to associations with a person's identity (diaries, photographs, and letters). These four forms of pollution are related to the person who previously owned the objects; they are polluted in association with their body, death, illness, dirt, and identity.

In this chapter, I use Mary Douglas' (1966) definition of pollution as "matter out of place" to examine how estate sale shoppers and estate sale workers interpret the whole estate sale, as well as certain objects within the sale, as polluted. I also examine how those involved in estate sales rate objects according to degrees of polluted-ness, rather than simply deeming them as polluted or not polluted. For example, in estate sales, people react more strongly toward stained underpants than a rusty cooking pan. I address gaps in the literature on pollution by addressing degrees of polluted-ness, as well as how objects are out of place due to their association with the person. I would argue that objects such as underpants, food, pillows, and diaries are out of place in estate sales because they are closely connected to their previous owner. I suggest that literature on pollution has ignored both associations with the person as well as degrees of polluted-ness.

The estate sale: Out of place



Figure 4.2

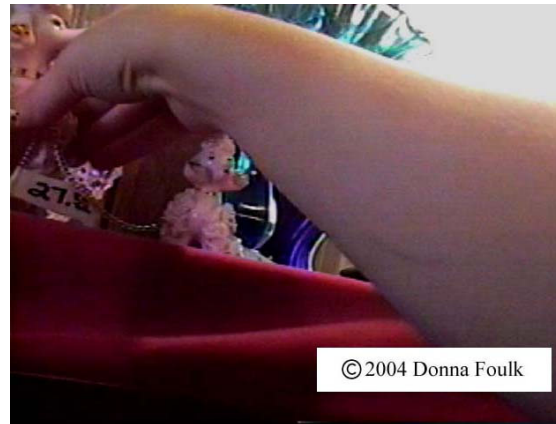


Figure 4.3

It is eight fifty in the morning. A crowd of over 50 people stand in a line outside the front door of a small suburban house. Neighbors peek out their windows; “what is going on over there?” they wonder. The line grows and grows until the front door opens at nine o’clock exactly. People pour through the house, shopping bag in one hand and the other on the merchandise. They push and grab, filling their sacks with doilies and porcelain poodles, mixing bowls and art deco ashtrays. Uncertain about what is going on in this stranger’s house, a child looks confused and asks his mother, “Mommy, why are we in this house?” For three days, this house is turned into an estate sale. For three days, the public is permitted to walk through someone’s house and dig through attic trunks and kitchen cabinets.

“I felt kind of strange about it at first,” an estate sale shopper says, referring to the first time she attended an estate sale, “I mean, you’re in someone else’s house. But you get used to it; now I don’t even think about it.” Many estate sale shoppers express their initial discomfort with estate sales. They feel out of place shopping in someone’s house

and going through their dresser drawers. One shopper, who frequently attends auctions, tells about her first experience at an estate sale:

I don't know what I expected. I mean, I knew I was going to an estate sale. But, it was so different going through those same items inside the house than it had been on auction tables. Even farm auctions, where the house is right there, they've just pulled it outside, you know. But it was very different. It's very different being in someone's house. I think you just get used to it because everyone I've taken to an estate sale has that same reaction, like they don't want to touch stuff or they feel real awkward. They don't really look at what is there; they don't paw through things. I'll go through things. I try not to make a total wreck of it. But, I've known that [feeling], and I was like that. I felt real awkward about searing through things and reaching for things and really looking at the stuff . . . I mean you would have never done that if they were alive. You'd never walk into, well most people would not walk into a house and look in the drawers and look in things, you know.

The act of shopping in someone's house makes a difference in how this shopper, or the person she goes to the estate sale with, feels when shopping. She feels out of place and "awkward" because this isn't the way she would normally act in someone's house.

The age of the home and objects within it, as well as the "feel" of the house make a difference in how out of place people feel in the estate sale. Estate sales usually occur when someone dies. So, objects in estate sales are usually antique, or at least older, items. This same shopper attends a sale where the house and most of the objects within it are newer. Thinking they were younger people from the objects and context, it makes her wonder what happened to the people living there. But it also makes her feel more out of place,

It's very different. It's a lot newer. This is almost more like walking inside somebody's house to me than the other two [sales] have been. Perhaps because it's closer to what I might live in. I really feel like I'm invading the space . . . It

feels more like I'm intruding than the other two. It's more like a place I might live, or a place that my friends might live, so it really feels intrusive to me. It's different.

The space is familiar for this shopper because it feels like her, or her friend's, home. To shop in such a space is out of place; one does not go shopping in their own home, or their friends' homes. But this type of sale is also "different" than other estate sales due to the newer items and newer home; it is out of place among other estate sales. So, the age and familiarity of the home has something to do with how out of place the actual estate sale is.

There are also certain spaces within the estate sale that are more out of place. Bedrooms and bathrooms are still considered private spaces for some shoppers. So, they feel uncomfortable when shopping in these spaces. As one shopper says,

When you do go into people's bedrooms, you do feel like you are a little bit intruding on their privacy even though they're not even there. When you are in somebody's bathroom with a whole bunch of other people [laughs], it's weird.

This shopper is uncomfortable, and feels intrusive and out of place in bedrooms and bathrooms. We do not usually enter someone's bedroom or bathroom with a large group of strangers. Often, we do not enter these places at all without permission. Another shopper expresses her discomfort when shopping in the bathroom,

I didn't really realize until I talked to you, and we went out today, the aversion that I have to walking into bathrooms . . . To me, that space is such a private space in the home. You know, when you walk into someone's house, you always ask if you can use their restroom. So, it's sort of strange just to walk in there and have toiletries and things laid out. I guess I unconsciously all this time avoided the bathrooms, rarely even walk in, and didn't realize I did it until I was with you

today. [I] just never bothered with it, you know. [I] never thought about there being anything in there but really had a hard time walking in there.

Bedrooms and bathrooms are often associated with the excretion or exchange of bodily fluids. Under ordinary circumstances, these are often private places where one closes the door and does not invite the public in. Since bodily emissions are often seen as polluted or polluting (Brain 1990; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Choksy 1986; Green 1997; Khare 1962; Meigs 1978; Namihira 1987), it makes sense that places such as the bedroom and bathroom are deemed as polluted by those involved in estate sales.

There are two reasons why estate sales are seen as out of place. For one, shoppers and estate sale workers describe the entire estate sale as out of place because this is not the way we usually act in a stranger's home, and this is not the setting we are used to when purchasing second-hand goods. When the child in the estate sale said, "Mommy, why are we in this house?" he expressed that shopping in someone's house is an unusual activity. Under ordinary circumstances, we do not sleep outside people's houses so we can be first in a crowd of 100 to look through the things they own. We do not enter their house running. We do not rush to their basement and dig through their boxes of heirlooms.

The estate sale provides an unusual shopping context where people get an intimate look at others through examining the things they own. According to an estate sale worker, this is why people enjoy working and shopping at estate sales,

We sort of like that taboo and being kind of naughty and going through people's stuff, even though we have been trained since birth, never to go into your mother's purse, and never go into your auntie's bedroom drawers, absolutely forbid. So we get to sneak in there at an estate sale and just go through everything.

Many shoppers and estate sale workers talk about how much they enjoy seeing people's homes and what they own. For those involved in estate sales, shopping and working in a context that is out of place, in someone's house, is part of the appeal of estate sales.

The second reason estate sales are out of place is due to their associations with death. Death is often seen as a polluting agent (Brain 1990; Chee Kiong 1990; Choksy 1986; Khare 1962; Meigs 1978; Namihira 1987; Norbeck 1952; Whyte 1990). According to one shopper, "I feel another way about estate sales too, I feel kind of like you're a vulture. You're going through dead people's things and sometimes that's kind of creepy." The association between estate sales and death bothers many people, and is a reason why many people do not shop at sales. Another shopper says,

I don't know if it's an unwritten rule that you don't talk about the people, or you don't let people know whether this is a living estate sale or whether the person is deceased. Maybe they do that for a reason because people might be turned off if they knew the fact that somebody died, or somebody died in that bed, in this house.

When people are reminded of the connection between the estate sale and death, they feel out of place. Most of the time, however, they either push the thought of death from their mind so they may enjoy the sale or they reason that estate sales have a positive side. One shopper enjoys shopping at estate sales because she feels that they benefit the family monetarily and emotionally. One shopper says,

What's interesting is that our culture, in the United States at this time . . . what's acceptable, what is considered [okay]. Some people would think going to an estate sale is just the ickiest thing imaginable. To them, it would be objectionable to go to someone's house, somebody who died, and look at their stuff, invade their privacy and come out with something that had belonged to somebody else.

Fine, but you know you can look at it in a way of, this is something I value, and you are paying for it, and [the family] can benefit from the fact that you're paying good money for it.

So, although the association between estate sales and death leads to a notion of the estate sale as being polluted, those who attend sales do not see sales as polluted enough to not be involved with them.

The entire estate sale can be seen as out of place. Besides estate sales, when do we get to peek in stranger's bedroom drawers? When do we get to dig through their boxes of Christmas ornaments that they have kept in the basement for the past 60 years? When do we get to peek in every corner of every room in their house, and look at everything they have owned lined up on card tables and display shelving? Although shoppers and estate sale workers "get used to it," they still admit that the estate sale is an unusual setting where both the event and the activity that goes on inside the sale is out of place.

Objects: Out of place

"This shouldn't be here" . . . "They should have thrown this away" . . . "I wouldn't want my underwear strewn all over the bed in my estate sale." These are a few of the comments that estate sale shoppers and workers make when they see objects in estate sales that they see as polluted. In estate sales, objects are seen as out of place in four ways: through their association with death, by being physically dirty, through their association with the body, and through their association with the identity of the previous owner. All of these are related to the previous owner of the object. These objects are

more or less polluted depending on reactions to and use of the object for the shopper and estate sale worker.

Out of place: Objects associated with death and illness

Objects as a whole, as well as specific objects, are associated with death and illness in estate sales. Since the estate sale occurs because of a death, all objects are associated with death and thus polluted. As mentioned above, this is one reason that some people do not shop at estate sales. One shopper buys clothing at estate sales. She describes her friend's reaction to these purchases:

I would always buy clothes and things, and she was like, 'you're wearing dead people's clothes.' I'm like, 'Well, it's not like they died in them, or wore them around after they were dead.' That's ridiculous.

Her friend associates clothing with death when it is purchased at an estate sale. This shopper, however, does not see clothing as polluted because she does not think about their previous owner as being dead when she purchases or wears the clothing. This is one reason that shoppers purchase objects associated with death.

"I don't think about the person that owned this item as being dead, because I think that is something that turns off a lot of people. I just think about it as someone who owned it before me." This shopper, like the one who buys clothing at estate sales, disassociates objects with death, and so does not see them as polluted. Another shopper does this as well by thinking about the person when they originally purchased the object, rather than thinking about them as sick or dead. When this shopper sees objects such as medical equipment, however, it reminds her that the person was ill:

[Medical equipment] makes me that they were probably in pain, and unhappy, and uncomfortable, and I don't want to think about them there. I would rather think about them when they were building the chair or buying the limoge. That I don't mind.

Medical equipment is out of place at an estate sale because it reminds people that the owner of these objects has been ill, and is probably dead.

Specific objects, such as pills, walkers, medical equipment, and food, are seen as polluted due to their associations with death and illness. People react to these objects with disgust and discomfort. A shopper says that she wishes the estate sale company would discard all the food because it reminds her that the people living there “were there yesterday . . . they were just eating there yesterday.” It reminds her that someone lived there, and brings to consciousness why the estate sale has occurred. People often push these thoughts of death and illness from their head, and think about the person when they purchased the object, or as currently living. When they see objects such as medical equipment, though, it snaps them back to reality.

One shopper doesn't like to see spices, walkers, and medical equipment for sale because, “It's almost too real. You know, I want a picture of this person healthy, when they bought the item, not dying.” So when this shopper sees these objects, she is bothered because, “it usually represents that they were failing.” These objects are polluted because they are associated with death and illness. They then pollute other objects because they remind people that all these objects are for sale because someone has died. These objects reify the life, illness, and death of the person who lived there.

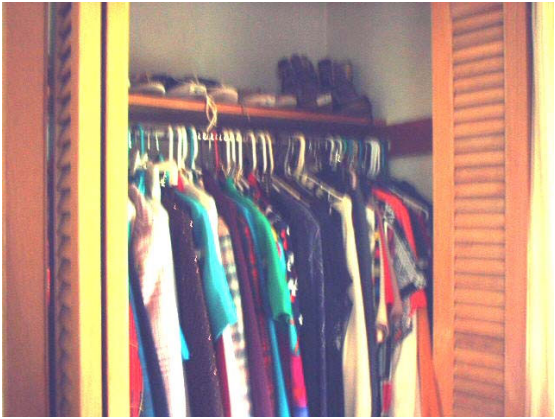


Figure 4.4



Figure 4.5

Out of place: Physically dirty objects

A roasting pan with pieces of dried food stuck in it and cooking oil baked on in a thin layer of shiny brown . . . a plush red carpet full of cat hair . . . a rusty Coca Cola serving tray . . . a box of glass Christmas ornaments covered with 50 years of dust and cobwebs . . . a moth eaten 1940s wool souvenir jacket from Mexico. Physically dirty objects are seen as polluted due to a physical element, defined by rust, dust, bugs, stains, and excessive signs of use. Although the object may actually be clean, such as a stained shirt that has been washed, it is still seen defined as a “dirty” object due to this physical element. When discussing a physically dirty object, shoppers and workers refer to the person who dirtied, or took ill care of, the object. Physical dirt affects how estate sale shoppers and workers view the objects themselves as well as the person who previously owned them.

According to Mary Douglas, “dirt is matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966). In estate sales, physical dirt is seen as out of place for both shoppers and estate sale workers. Physical dirt repulses. Estate sale shoppers and workers react with disgust. Objects that

are physically dirty are discarded, donated, cleaned, or segregated from other non-polluted objects.

Both estate sale workers and shoppers use physically dirty objects to judge their owner. According to one estate sale worker, physically dirty objects reflect the attitude of their owner, “It shows no care . . . obviously the person who had it didn’t care about it. They obviously didn’t care about it if it’s nasty, dirty, filthy.” This estate sale worker sees these objects as out of place in an estate sale, and so either makes them in place by cleaning or segregating them, or gets rid of them.

Estate sale workers react to physically dirty objects that they deem polluted in four ways: they donate them, discard them, segregate them from non-polluted objects, or clean them to make them in place in the sale. Some estate sale companies go to great lengths to clean objects before an estate sale. They wash the dishes, polish the silver, dust the knick-knacks, and wax the furniture. If objects are seen as too polluted, they are donated or thrown away. Too many moth holes, or too much dirt and grime can cause the estate sale workers to deem objects too polluted to sell.

Pollution is also expressed through space in that polluted objects are often segregated from other non-polluted objects. Physically dirty objects are moved to certain areas of the house: the garage and the basement. According to Mary Douglas, “all margins . . . are treated as dangerous and polluting” (1972: 200). The garage and basement are marginal spaces that are not quite part of the house, but at its outer boundaries. While shopping in the garage of an estate sale, a shopper says, “It does feel different [in the garage]. The garage feels more like neutral territory, it’s not like you’re really in the house.” This marginal polluted space, then, is used as a place to house

marginal polluted objects. Although objects that are physically dirty are often already present in these areas, the estate sale company does rearrange and move other physically dirty objects to these places to segregate them from non-polluted objects.

Estate sale shoppers react to physically dirty objects by either not purchasing them, or purchasing them and cleaning them. Shoppers also react to the context surrounding the object. When an object is in a basement or garage, shoppers are more likely to see the object as polluted. Shoppers expect to find dirty, broken objects in the basement and garage of an estate sale. When shoppers do purchase an object that is polluted, they purify this object through cleaning it. One shopper keeps her estate sale purchases in her garage until she can thoroughly clean the objects. Once they have been cleaned, she brings them into her house. In this way, she segregates polluted objects from non-polluted objects until she can make them in place in her own life.



Figure 4.6a

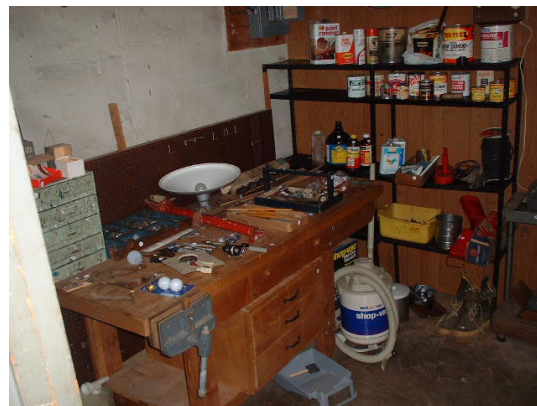


Figure 4.6b

Figure 4.6: Physically dirty objects are segregated from non-polluted objects. They are often placed in the garage or basement.

Out of place: Objects associated with the body

I went to another estate sale . . . I felt like [the woman who died] had been violated. They didn't throw away anything. All the medical things were out. They should have been thrown away. Her whole life was spilled out in front of us. It bothered me.

-Estate sale shopper

Underpants, food, pillows, gloves, clothes, and medical equipment: these are objects associated with the body. They are “dirty,” “nasty,” and “personal.” Like physically dirty objects, when these objects show up in estate sales, people react with discomfort and disgust. The comment, “they should have been thrown away,” echoes the sentiment that these objects are out of place in an estate sale.

Bodily emissions are well-documented as polluted in many cultures (Brain 1990; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Choksy 1986; Green 1997; Khare 1962; Meigs 1978; Namihara 1987; Norbeck 1952). According to Mary Douglas, body margins and that which passes through these margins are both powerful and dangerous (Douglas 1966). These emissions become out of place after exiting the body. When these emissions potentially come in contact with an object, the object becomes polluted. It is important to note that these objects need not be actually touched by any real bodily emissions; the potential itself is enough to pollute the object.

Shoppers and workers are often repulsed by objects that have potentially been in contact with bodily emissions. One shopper refuses to purchase clothing at estate sales due to the previous owner's sweat, “I guess [it is] just [because] their sweat, their body oils [are] in it. It's physical. It's a physical thing. It's the physicality of it.” She sees clothing as polluted due to its physical closeness to the body of the previous owner.

Underpants are the most often cited objects associated with the body that are polluted. They are described as “dirty,” “personal,” “unclean,” and “nasty.” Most estate sale workers throw away underpants unless they are new in a package. One estate sale worker said, “We toss it. That’s a little personal.” Another worker says they throw away underpants because, “I don’t want a wad of underwear on the bed. It doesn’t look clean. It doesn’t display well.” When everything else is neat and organized in her sale, describing underwear as in “a wad” shows her notion that used underwear can’t be neat and in place in the estate sale. By “it doesn’t look clean,” she means that underpants are “dirty,” and thus polluted. Underpants are seen as different from other clothing items such as pants, slippers, and pajamas. Underpants are seen as more out of place in an estate sale because they are more closely associated with the body, and more potentially polluted by bodily emissions, than other clothing objects. One estate sale worker says, “At that last sale we did, she had lots of summer nightgowns, slippers. We can keep those and sell them. [We threw away] bras and panties [because they were] personal things.” Estate sale shoppers, as well, see underwear as out of place in an estate sale unless it is new in a package,

I have to admit that that one [estate sale] in the big house that we were at, that’s the first one I’ve ever seen underwear all over the place like that. That was in poor taste, I guess is how I look at it. It might have been new, I don’t know. But I don’t think so.

Objects in estate sales are not always consciously associated with bodily emissions, but they are consciously associated with the body in general. One shopper is “turned off” by linens, especially bed linens, due to their contact with the body of the previous owner:

They have been used. It's strange because that kind of contact with the body is something that sort of turns me off toward those items. Where, especially being in their setting, being in the house where you go to the linen closet and pull them out, you know that type of thing. That's sort of a turn off to me for some reason.

Another shopper expresses her discomfort with a pair of gloves, and their associations with the body of the person who previously wore them,

I did buy some leather gloves before at an estate sale. It was like, 'wow these are cool, they fit.' Then somewhere down the road I stopped to think, 'well wait a minute, that person who had these, actually, their hands were in these gloves.' And how do you clean gloves? So anyway, I kind of stopped wearing them.

Many objects associated with the body are described as "too personal." This same shopper discusses how gloves, hats, and handbags are too personal, and too associated with the body for her to feel comfortable wearing them.

Things like hats are kind of personal, and like I said hand gloves and handbags are kind of [personal]. I guess it's because they're just so close to a person's body, and skin in contact.

This shopper reacts to objects associated with the body by not wearing them. Shoppers also react by cleaning or refusing to purchase these objects. Another shopper is disgusted by the idea that the previous owner handled the kitchen items that she purchases:

Hmmm, something about kitchen utensils and things. I got some of the Fireking bowls and things. I use those for my baking and casseroles . . . It borders on the, 'ewww this is almost too private to touch,' because they were really used and their hands were all over them and their food was in them and the likes. But, good sterilization in the dishwasher takes care of that [laughs].

Shoppers react by cleaning, not wearing, and not purchasing these objects because objects associated with the body make people uncomfortable.

Part of this discomfort stems from the view that, by being close to the body, these objects are closely identified with another person. Part of the person remains with the object. One shopper sees the person as connected to the object through their DNA,

Another thing that seems like to me a private thing is things like pillows, and you know, like pillows that people sleep on. It just seems like you couldn't really clean it, couldn't dry clean it. Somehow, their DNA would be on it.

This goes back to notions of personhood, and how objects and their previous owners remain connected even after the previous owner is gone. Even if people don't label objects as polluted due to DNA, they still see the objects as closely associated with the person. This same shoppers continues,

Really, the idea, what I said about their DNA, probably 20 years ago nobody would have said anything about that. But, it was still that feeling that, 'oh that person wore that and part of them was [on it].' It's too much a part of them for me wanting to be sharing them.

The object remains a part of the person due to its physical closeness to their body. Shoppers see this closeness as polluted, and are therefore unlikely to buy the object. Estate sale workers, as well, react to these objects with discomfort. Workers also react by discarding, donating, and segregating these objects.

Two opened packages of adult diapers sit near and under a card table in the bathroom. I ask Marla, an estate sale company worker, about the diapers. She tells me why they are in the sale:

[We sell them] because these haven't been used. They're new in the package. Frankly if I had [set up] this room, I would have thrown them out. But Sheri, [who set up the room], doesn't throw a lot of stuff out. So, I did go ahead and price them. I don't know why anyone would buy them [because they are] somebody else's opened package, you know. But they haven't been worn.



Figure 4.7

Estate sale workers place adult diapers in the bathroom to segregate them from other objects

Like physically dirty objects, objects associated with the body are segregated from non-polluted objects. By placing the adult diapers in the bathroom on and near the floor, they are segregated from other, non-polluted objects. I have seen spices in the basement, buckets of oats in the garage, and underpants in a box on the floor in the bedroom. Objects associated with the body are moved to the garage, bathroom, and basement. When objects are not moved to these other rooms, they are segregated from non-polluted objects through the use of boxes or box lids. It is important to note that these polluted objects are not displayed in conspicuous places around the house. One does not walk in the front door of the estate sale to find underpants, bars of soap, and bottles of ketchup sitting in the foyer.

Those involved in estate sales react to objects that are associated with the body with disgust and revulsion. For estate sale workers, this means that the objects will be discarded, donated, or segregated to marginal areas of the house. For shoppers, this means that these objects will not be purchased. In both cases, the revulsion comes from the associated closeness to the body and bodily emissions of the person who owned them. I now turn to polluted objects that are associated with the person in a different way. While objects such as soap, underpants, and medical objects are associated with the physical person, objects such as diaries, letters, and photographs are associated with the identity of a person.



Figure4.8a



Figure 4.8b

Figure 4.8: Estate sale shoppers and workers see objects such as hats (Figure 4.8a) and bed linens (Figure 4.8b) as polluted due to their associations with the body of their previous owner.

Photographs, letters, and diaries as out of place:

Objects associated with identity

[Objects associated with the body] almost repulse me. The photographs do not repulse me. I have no problem looking through them. I just feel they didn't belong there. They should belong with people who can put them in context and that it's their history. It's really a sad thing to me that they're there. But, since they are, I'll buy them.

-Estate sale shopper

Estate sale shoppers and workers see photographs, diaries, and letters as out of place in the estate sale. Shoppers, as the one above, clearly state that these objects should not be for sale. However, they are polluted in a different way than objects such as underpants and stained tea towels. They are not out of place because they are “dirty.” They are out of place because they should remain with the family or friends. Objects associated with the identity of a person are out of place when they are for sale and purchased by a stranger. While physically dirty objects and objects associated with the body repulse, objects associated with identity evoke feelings of sadness. In the estate sale, there are three objects that are strongly associated with the identity of a person: photographs, letters and diaries.

Photographs

Shoppers dig through hundreds of photographs that sit in a box in the living room. A piece of masking tape is stuck on the side of the box, “photographs, 20 for \$1.” Many shoppers are saddened by the box of photographs. They comment that the photographs should not be there. Yet, they sort out ten photographs and pay their dollar.



Figure 4.9

For estate sale shoppers, photographs are definitely out of place at an estate sale. This is because photographs have such a strong connection to the identity of a person. Shoppers discuss how these photographs are part of the person's life and how they represent the person. Therefore, they are sad to see this obvious connection to the person sold to a stranger through the estate sale. According to one shopper, "It's sort of sad to see them because it means that nobody wanted them or there was nobody left."



Movie 5: Family photo album

The overarching feeling of the shoppers is “why doesn’t anyone want these?” Although undoubtedly some photographs are sold without the knowledge of the family, many are rejected by the family. According to the estate sale company, photographs are rejected either because the family does not know who is in the photograph, they do not care about them, or because they have a duplicate copy of the photograph. Sometimes, the family simply doesn’t exist. According to an estate sale worker,

Typically [photographs, diaries, and letters] have been removed by the time we get there. If not, if we find them, then we offer them to the owner because anything that has a name, some kind of memory attached to it, we figure they’d want it. Let me clarify that, if [the] family does not want them, we put them out for sale. We have had sales where the family says “these photographs don’t mean anything to us, oh yea, sure, [it is okay to sell them].”

If the family does not want the photographs, they are sold. However, the estate sale company often has a hard time deciding on a price for them. One-of-a-kind objects like photographs, as well as diaries and letters, do not really have a set market price. This fact echoes the sentiment of many shoppers that these objects are out of place and should not be for sale. Therefore, they may be priced extremely high due to their unique nature, or ridiculously cheap, such as the box photographs marked “20 for \$1.”

Though they evoke sadness, the photographs are also intriguing to shoppers. According to one shopper, “I get more of a curiosity with the letters and the photographs, what the whole story was.” This crosses over into notions of personhood, and the reasons that shoppers enjoy estate sales. Many shoppers express that they enjoy estate sales because they like to see how other people live and what they own. Seeing how they look, through their photographs, is an extension of this curiosity. It puts one more visual piece

in the puzzle as shoppers create the identity of the person who lived there.



Movie 6: Stories of people in wedding photographs

Letters

Letters are treated differently than photographs by estate sale workers, “If the family doesn’t want the letters, I’ll throw them away. I don’t think it’s anybody’s business to have somebody else’s personal items.” Letters are seen as more personal, more revealing, than photographs. Although letters are also associated with a person’s identity, they are seen as more out of place than photographs and hence thrown away.

For estate sale companies, not selling the letters is “a privacy issue.” When one is living, photographs are shared with others and widely displayed in one’s home. They are framed and hung on the wall. Letters, on the other hand, are not meant for display. They are kept in drawers and shoe boxes, and not shared with others. Estate sale workers see

letters as out of place due to their connection to a person's identity and the private nature of the objects. Letters are therefore inappropriate to sell. According to an estate sale worker,

I think there's a privacy issue here. When I uncover something that has some link to who they are, I don't want to be responsible for selling it. If someone else wants to sell it, then I will buy it.

As this quote shows, when an estate sale worker becomes an estate sale shopper, they view these items differently. The objects are still out of place, but their responsibility to protect the privacy of their client is no longer an issue.

Like photographs, shoppers find letters intriguing. Also like photographs, letters evoke a sense of sadness because the history of this person's life is being sold rather than remaining in the family. However, as with all objects associated with the identity of a person, this sadness does not deter shoppers from purchasing these polluted objects.

Diaries

Like letters and photographs, diaries evoke a sense of sadness when they are for sale. Once again, this stems from the idea that these objects are out of place in a sale, and should be with the family rather than sold to strangers. One shopper says,

Diaries are really private, but I think they are something that should be held onto for the family. Letters tell what they wanted to tell other people, or what they allowed themselves to tell other people. Diaries a lot of the time are what they couldn't tell anyone else. So, it's their real truth for themselves. It may be skewed in how they are viewing their world but it's how they really felt about things. They're extremely private. Yes, I would probably read it if I found it. But I hate to see that come up in a sale.

Shoppers react in similar ways to diaries as they do to letters and photographs. As this shopper says, there is a sense of intrigue.

Diaries are rarely found in estate sales. However, shoppers are excited by the idea that they could discover one in a sale. One shopper says,

I don't know that I've ever come across any kind of diaries. I'd buy them in a heartbeat. Again, it's the history, it's the manuscript. Every book is just somebody telling somebody's life story. These letters are telling someone's life story. It could be fiction, it could be. It's real though. That [is] history.

This shopper is intrigued by the historical aspect of reading about someone's life in another time. Even though they are highly interested in diaries, shoppers still see them as out of place. Another shopper discusses her interest in diaries,

I have to admit if I ran across one, I'd probably pop it open and take a look to see. And that's one of those things that you'd really wonder whether it was supposed to be in the sale or not . . . I might ask if I came across something like that whether it was supposed to be in the sale.

Although she would read the diary, this shopper would still see it as out of place in the estate sale, and would question whether it was really meant to be sold.

Like letters, estate sale workers see diaries as more private than photographs. Unlike photographs, diaries are not meant for others to see. This means that diaries are removed from the sale due to their private nature. They are more out of place, and hence more polluted, than photographs. Shopping at an estate sale, I find a stack of a housewife's daily diaries from the 1950s and early 1960s. They are mixed in with a small amount of paperwork, sitting on a card table in the garage. They are unpriced. Intrigued, as estate shoppers are with diaries, I wonder what the daily ins and outs were like for this

woman. When I approach the cashier and ask about the price of the diaries, she takes them and says, “Oh, these aren’t for sale. Thanks for finding them though. I’ll give them to the family; they might want them.” In this case, the diaries made it into the sale by mistake. The estate sale worker sees them as out of place, and so removes them from the sale.

Letters, diaries, and photographs are out of place in an estate sale. However, unlike physically dirty objects and objects associated with the body, objects associated with identity evoke sadness rather than disgust. While polluted, these objects intrigue the shopper. Shoppers are more likely to purchase objects associated with identity than physically dirty objects or those associated with the body. However, objects associated with the body and physically dirty objects are sometimes purchased by shoppers. When does this take place? In the next section, I explore why these purchases occur, and how they are related to perceived degrees of polluted-ness as well as intended use of the object.

Degrees of polluted-ness

Stained shirts, grimy pots and pans, and underpants are sold at estate sales for two reasons: because there are different types of estate sales with different degrees of cleanliness and organization, and because there are different types and degrees of polluted-ness. Space, the context of the sale, use, cleanability, and degree of closeness to the body all make a difference in the degree of polluted-ness. First, though, the estate sale company influences the perceived degree of polluted-ness through their reputation, cleaning and display techniques.

Two types of sales

There are two types of estate sale companies with different reputations. They have different standards of cleanliness and organization in their sales, and this affects how shoppers view the objects they purchase at these sales. Their different ways of setting up the sale, as well as what they allow to be sold, affect how shoppers perceive objects' degrees of polluted-ness. While the following are two opposite types of estate sale companies, most companies fall somewhere in between.

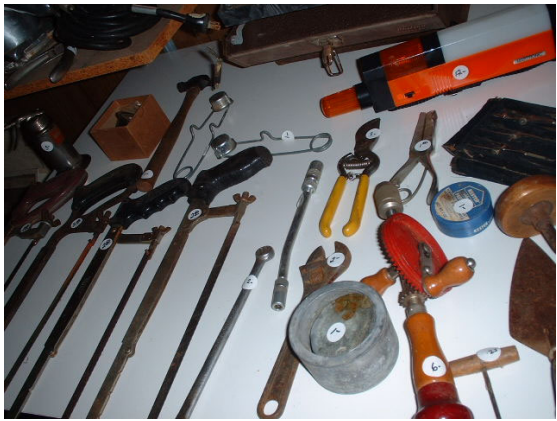


Figure 4.10a



Figure 4.10b

Figure 4.10: The first type of estate sale company even organizes and neatly arranges the tools and carpet cleaners.

The first type of estate sale company is known for being very clean and organized. They go to great lengths to polish the silver, set the table, and display objects in an elaborate fashion. They set up display tables with tablecloths. This type of estate sale company has gone through every niche and corner in the house. Every object is priced and neatly arranged. This type of estate sale company classifies and organizes objects by color, material, or use. “I like to keep like things together,” one worker says. One estate sale company describes this as “merchandising.” Because they spend a lot of

time merchandising, cleaning, and organizing, their sales tend to be more expensive than the second type of sales. In the first type of sale, objects deemed out of place are donated, discarded, or segregated from non-polluted objects.



Figure 4.11a



Figure 4.11b

Figure 4.11: The first type of estate sale company has elaborate displays, such as lobsters and Christmas lights in the kitchen pantry (Figure 4.11a) and clothed mannequins (Figure 4.11b).

The second type of estate sale company is known for being very dirty and unorganized. Objects are never cleaned. Organization and display are not a priority. The company brings in a few card tables to display a few things on, but most objects are left where they are found. In these sales, kitchen drawers and bedroom closets have not yet been looked through. Few things are priced. In this type of sale, shoppers may buy objects singly or by the boxful. Letters and diaries are more likely to be sold at this type of sale because they are not discarded or held back by the estate sale company. Shoppers may buy them with loads of other books or papers, as Edith did with the 1950s sex book. In the second type of sale, polluted objects are less likely to be discarded and segregated from other objects because everything is pretty much left as it was when the person lived there.



Figure 4.12a



Figure 4.12b

Figure 4.12: The second type of estate sale is known for being messy and disorganized.

These types of estate sales affect objects' degrees of polluted-ness within the sale. The first type is more likely to clean objects, and thus to un-pollute them. They also have a reputation for having nice, clean, expensive, quality objects at their sales. This affects how shoppers view objects they purchase from this type of estate sale. Shoppers remember what the sale was like and who ran it.

The context surrounding an object affects its degree of polluted-ness. When an object is purchased in the first type of estate sale, it is less likely to be seen as polluted than an object purchased at the second type of sale. So, the context of the entire estate sale, and how polluted it is perceived to be, affects the polluted-ness of specific items within the sale. One shopper saw kitchen items as polluted due to her impression of the sale as a whole:

We went into a really disgusting one a few weeks ago. The basement was just disgusting, and the smell. My friend was trying to look at this TV, and all I wanted to do was run upstairs. I was like, 'Come on, we've got to get out of here!' . . . It was so disgusting. Usually I'm not that squimish about it. I don't know what it was, but it was a stinky basement . . . I wouldn't have bought any kitchen

things there. I guess if I could run it through the dishwasher, but yea. That would definitely affect [what I buy].

Her perception of the sale as “disgusting” affects what she buys, and whether or not these objects need cleaning to un-pollute them. So, the context of the entire sale affects the polluted-ness of particular objects within the sale.

Objects purchased from the first type of estate sale are less likely to be seen as polluted because of the cleanliness and organization of the sale. When the whole sale is classified and organized (all brass objects together, kitchen items in the kitchen, broken objects in the basement), and everything is in place within these classifications, objects are less likely to be seen as out of place. When an object is purchased from the second type of estate sale, though it may not be physically dirty, it is more likely to be associated with the dirt and grime that characterize the sale. Therefore, it is more likely to be seen as dirty itself. There are different general degrees of polluted-ness in different types of estate sales, but there are also different degrees and types of polluted-ness for individual objects.

Degrees of polluted-ness

Shoppers, as well as estate sale workers, rate polluted objects on a scale. Used is more polluted than unused, opened packages more polluted than unopened, non-cleanable more polluted than cleanable, and objects that are associated with sex more polluted than objects not associated with sex. How close an object is to the body, how physically dirty it is, and how closely it is connected to the identity of the previous owner are all things that shoppers and workers consider when they evaluate an object. They take all of these things into account when they calculate the polluted-ness of an object, and whether or not

they wish to discard, donate, or purchase the object.

Degrees of polluted-ness change over the course of an object's life. I have already discussed how estate sale companies clean objects to un-pollute them and make them desirable. Shoppers, too, purchase polluted objects and purify them through cleaning and appropriating them. Part of this cleaning ritual is about getting rid of the pollution of the previous owner. A shopper says,

That ice bucket [points to bucket sitting on buffet], it was kind of dull and ugly. But then I polished it up, just washed it and loved it, and like [after I cleaned it I thought], 'ooooh, neat.' You can do that with things like that, but it's a little bit harder with textiles and all to make it feel like all of a sudden it doesn't belong to that person before, it belongs to you.

This shopper illustrates how the ability to clean away the dirt of the previous owner makes a difference in the polluted-ness of an object. To purify an object of being physically dirty is to purify it of the pollution of the previous owner.

The use of an object also affects its perceived degree of polluted-ness. According to one estate sale worker, the polluted-ness of old lingerie is different depending on the context and use:

This is a woman that is a friend of mine, I was telling her about the marketability of the nicer, lacy, outstanding slips that were worn in the 40s and 50s that are now tops and dresses in the [local] area. And she chastised me about selling someone's personal items like that, that I assume she was saying should be discarded, and it's really no one's business going into someone's lingerie drawer. I can see her side of that as a woman, and I certainly wouldn't want anyone going through my mother's drawers quite frankly. I wouldn't. But that may be something that needs to be discussed in full with the estate sale company, and clarify the details,

because we are certainly not without conscience, and we are not going to sell everything at anyone's embarrassment, or so forth and so on. But we can't really quite ignore that there's a market for this.

This estate sale worker acknowledges that in the estate sale, this object may be seen as out of place, but it has different meanings and degrees of polluted-ness depending on how it is used. Another estate sale worker says that she sells perfume atomizers and fancy lotion bottles because, although they were originally intended for one-time use, they can be cleaned and used for display:

She had some lotion bottles that were decorative, and some perfume atomizers. . . [We sold them] because they could be, if they had lotion in them, they could be cleaned. They could be reused by someone else. The perfume atomizers, some people would use them just as a decorative touch on a table rather than using them for the original purpose.

Here, lotion bottles and perfume atomizers could potentially be seen as polluted because they are both used and associated with the body. However, this estate sale worker sells these objects because they can be used for decoration as well. Objects that are otherwise polluted can be seen as in place when they are used for purposes other than their intended use.

Otherwise polluted objects can also be seen as in place when they are purchased for someone else's use. One shopper purchases two twin beds with stained mattresses. When she discovers that the mattresses are stained, she says, "It's okay. It's just for the grandkids when they sleep over." Because these stained mattresses will be used by her grandchildren, this shopper did not mind purchasing them. Another shopper says that she

would not purchase a mattress at an estate sale for her own use. However, she would purchase one for her guest room,

Mattresses, [I would be] less likely to buy, especially if they are old. But if you were going [to use] a mattress for the guest room, and if it was new, looked new, looked nice, that's one thing, you know. [I would not buy a mattress] for something [we] are going to be using all the time.

This shopper expresses her perceived degrees of polluted-ness when she says she would not purchase an old mattress. One that looks nice and new, however, is not as polluted. Still, this mattress is somewhat polluted because this shopper would not use it for her own everyday use.

New objects, or objects that look new, are less polluted than used objects.

Underwear is usually seen as very polluted by both shoppers and estate sale workers. However, when it is new with tags or in a sealed package, it is less polluted, and thus okay to buy and sell. One shopper purchases old linens for her bed, but only if they are new in a package. If they have been used, they are too polluted to purchase for everyday use,

The only linens that I've bought that I've actually put on the beds have been new in packages. I've gotten ahold of some vintage ones that were still in packages. I've never thought about whether there was some underlying aversion to the fact that they were on someone else's bed. That's possible, but I've never really considered it. Considering this, I think it's probable.

Even if they aren't new, objects that "look new," or are in good shape, are perceived to be less polluted than objects that do not "look new." When purchasing towels, one shopper chooses newer looking towels and rejects older worn ones,

I was drawn more to the ones that I thought looked newer than some of the older ones. And there were some that I thought, ‘well this will make a good drying towel for the car, or for the puppy or whatever,’ just because they were worn.

She sees worn towels as more polluted, and would not purchase them or use them as bath towels. Shoppers and estate sale workers see otherwise polluted objects, such as bed sheets, bath towels, and underpants, as less polluted when they are new or “look new.”

The amount of dirt on an object or its degree of closeness to the body also make a difference in how polluted an object is perceived to be. When an object has a lot of dirt on it, it is seen as more polluted than an object that has only a little dirt on it. Very dirty objects are more likely to be discarded by estate sale workers. Whether these physically dirty objects are cleanable makes a difference in the degree of pollution; a cleanable object is less polluted than one that cannot be washed or cleaned. Like the amount of dirt on an object, the degree of closeness to the body makes a difference in degrees of polluted-ness. Although slippers are seen as polluted by both shoppers and workers, they are less polluted than underpants. Shoppers and workers see underpants as more private than slippers, and less appropriate to buy and sell at an estate sale. Underpants are worn closer to the body, so the degree of pollution is greater than slippers. Although somewhat out of place, and sometimes discarded, slippers are less polluted than underpants. Therefore, estate sale workers are more likely to sell slippers than underpants.

When multiple forms of pollution are combined, an object has a higher degree of pollution than objects with only one form of pollution. Bed sheets or underpants with stains are more polluted than those without stains. Bath towels that have seen a lot of use are more polluted than those that are “like new.” The combination of physical dirt, the

degree of closeness to the body, and the association with death and illness make an object more polluted than objects that have only one of these polluted qualities.

Objects in estate sales are not simply polluted. There are various degrees and types of pollution, and this affects how shoppers and workers interact with these objects. Underpants are more polluted than slips, though both are polluted due to their associations with the body. A stained mattress is more polluted than one that looks “like new.” The use, condition, cleanability, amount of physical dirt, perceived degree of closeness to the body, setup of the estate sale, and association with the identity of the previous owner all affect whether the object will be sold, bought, thrown away, segregated, furiously cleaned, or treasured.

Conclusion

I even saw some jeans hanging up today. I just couldn't go over and think about it. For me, that's just one of those strange quirks where I can walk in their bedroom and I can sort through all their other belongings but the clothing and the toiletries and that kind of stuff is just too much off the deep end for me.

-Estate sale shopper

In estate sales, some objects are okay to buy, but not okay to use. Some are used only after they are purified through washing or cleaning. Some are repulsive and will not even be considered for purchase. Others are out of place, evoke sadness, and yet are okay to buy. Although underpants, food, diaries, and greasy casserole dishes are all polluted, they are polluted in different ways and on different degrees.

I use Mary Douglas' definition of pollution as “matter out of place” to examine notions of pollution in estate sales. First, the entire sale is out of place in that people are

shopping in someone's home and digging through their dresser drawers. Secondly, individual objects are seen as polluted in four ways: through associations with death and illness, through physical dirt, through associations with the body, and through associations with a person's identity. All of these notions of pollution are connected to the person who previously owned the items.

While pollution is a popular topic of inquiry, there have not been studies that critically analyze the different kinds of pollution associated with objects and the person. In estate sales, objects such as medical equipment and food are polluted due to their associations the death and illness of the person who lived in the estate. Objects such as underpants and pillows are polluted due to their associations with the body and bodily emissions of their previous owner. Objects such as photographs, diaries, and letters are polluted because they are associated with the identity of the person who owned them. Objects such as grimy dishes and dusty bowling balls also tell us something about the person who owned them. Shoppers and estate sale workers make judgments of the person who owned these objects based on the condition that they are in. Until estate sale shoppers or workers erase the pollution of the person who previously owned them, these objects are out of place in an estate sale and in the lives of the people who purchase them.

In this study, I also examine varying degrees of polluted-ness, another topic that has been given little if any attention in the literature on pollution. Although there have been a few attempts to create a hierarchy of pollution (Brain 1990; Singh 1966), there is very little written about degrees of pollution. In estate sales, these degrees depend on the object's use, clean-ability, amount of physical dirt, perceived degree of closeness to the body, association with the identity of the previous owner, association with death and

illness, and setup of the estate sale. This then affects how people interact with and interpret the objects.

Dirty golf shoes, Victorian love letters, and half-used boxes of Kleenex are all polluted objects in estate sales. However, the type of pollution and degree of polluted-ness varies for each of these objects. How dirty the shoes are, and whether the Kleenexes will be used for one's nose or an art project affect how out of place these objects are in the estate sale, and how in place they can be when they are purchased and incorporated into one's own life.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

I once went to an estate sale where this woman had kept everything. I bought all of her old 50s beaded sweaters. I wonder if she wore them when she was 80, or if she just kept them in a drawer for 50 years. They had to be favorites to keep that long because they were really worn. I found piles of old greeting cards in her basement. One had a picture of a girl on the front from the 1940s. Inside there was a note that said, “here’s a dollar to start your charm bracelet.” It was from her brother.



Figure 5.1

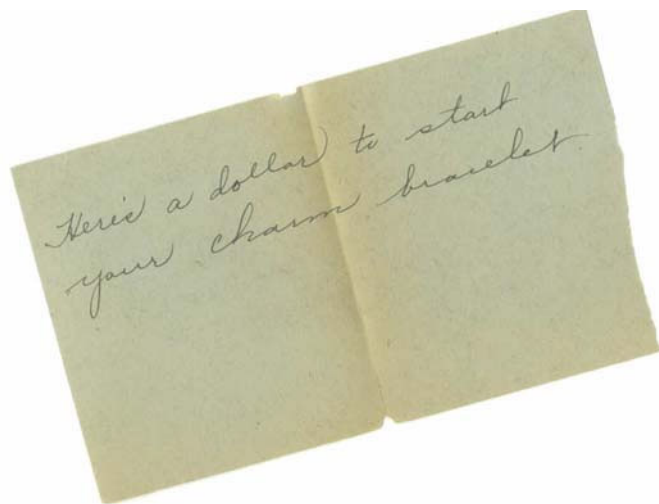


Figure 5.2

Objects are indeed communicative. Whether it is a 30 year old roll of unused toilet paper or a polka-dotted squirrel figurine, every object that a person owns can tell us something about who they are. Through these objects, and the contexts that surround them, we create an idea of this person. We create a visual image, a personality, and a life.

In some way, we feel like we know this person. Therefore, the objects at an estate sale don't just belong to "some anonymous stranger." According to an estate sale shopper,

It just seems like there's some point that the [underwear] should just be donated somewhere so [the person who owned them is] anonymous. And I know they're anonymous because you don't really know this person that you're at this sale. But it doesn't feel like that to me. It doesn't feel anonymous.

It is this connection to the person that makes certain objects, physically dirty objects and those associated with death, illness, the body, and the identity of the previous owner, feel out of place in the sale. To this shopper, underwear is polluted due to its associations with the body of its previous owner. But it is also polluted because this shopper sees a strong connection between the person and their things due to the situation of the estate sale.

The context of the estate sale contributes to the creation of personhood and feelings of both objects and oneself as out of place. In the estate sale, people are shopping in someone's home. They dig through closets and kitchen cabinets, trunks in the attic and boxes in the basement. They see all the photographs, dishes, clothes, tools, end tables, and tea towels that a person owned. They also see things they wish they didn't see: dentures, spices, greasy dirt-filled frying pans, half used bottles of bubble bath, objects that they see as polluted. Shopping in a house and digging through someone's bedroom drawers, two things that we do not do under ordinary circumstances, contribute to feelings of being out of place.

In the estate sale, there are other objects such as letters, diaries, and photographs, that are deemed out of place due to their associations with the identity of their previous owner. These objects, however, are treated differently by shoppers. Unlike physically dirty objects and those associated with death, illness, and the body, these objects do not

repulse. Rather, they intrigue. Although they are seen as out of place, and inappropriately for sale at an estate sale, shoppers wish to purchase these objects. This shows that there are different kinds of pollution, and different reactions to differently polluted objects.

In the literature on the meanings of objects, it is widely known that objects and their owners are connected. Objects represent us, as well as make up who we are (Baudrillard 1981; Belk 1992; Berger 1999[1984]; Dant 1999; Davis 1990; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Ginsburg 1996; Hocking 2000; Kirkham 1996; Williams-Forsion 2001). We use objects such as our clothing and cars to signal things such as our status and beliefs to others. In estate sales, objects are used in the same way. Through these objects, we create the gender, size, income, likes and dislikes, occupations, motivations, religion, personality, and life events of the person who owned them. In the estate sale, however, we create our own idea of this person in a different way than we do with our friends and acquaintances. Most people involved in estate sales have never actually met the person that they “get to know.” They learn about this person only through the objects that they own and the contexts that surround these objects.

How accurately, then, can we create a person through the objects that they own? Objects are capable of carrying many different meanings at any given time (Carrier 1990; Douglas 1994; Fischer 1992; Gottdiener 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Komter 2001; Riggins 1994; Sidenvall and Nydahl, et al. 2000; Steiner 1995; Watson 1997). These meanings rely on the object’s context as well as the viewer. Since there are multiple viewers with multiple interpretations, objects never have only one clear set meaning. Although estate shoppers and workers can speculate about the meanings of the object, they do not know what role it played or what it meant in the life of its previous owner.

Rather than mirrors, objects are mere representations of us (Stewart 1984). Although we can create a person through their objects, there are too many possible interpretations and individual meanings to fully know a person through the things that they own.

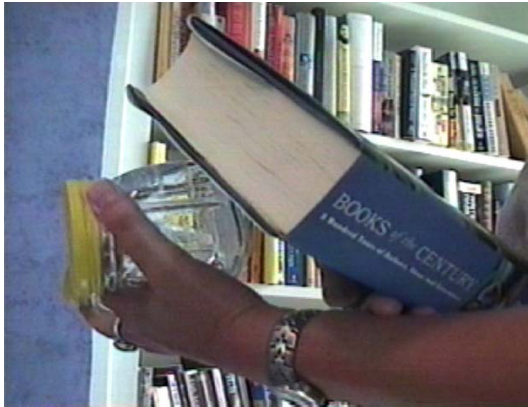


Figure 5.3



Figure 5.4

Significance and future directions

This study contributes to the literature on personhood and pollution by suggesting connections between the two bodies of literature as well as exploring personhood through objects and their contexts and various degrees of polluted-ness. This study suggests that there needs to be more work on varying degrees of polluted-ness. Most works see people or objects as either polluted or not polluted, ignoring the shades of gray. Further research is needed on the construction and varying effects of degrees of polluted-ness. As well, literature on personhood and objects often ignores the importance of the contexts surrounding these objects. In addition, there needs to be more research on whether certain objects lend themselves more to the creation of personhood than others.

Only a small number of studies on pollution have alluded to varying degrees of polluted-ness. Brain (1990) briefly lists a hierarchy of polluted emissions and Singh (1966) reports five degrees of defilement among Hindu notions of pollution. These

degrees of polluted-ness, however, are but brief points for both Brain and Singh. This study suggests that there are various degrees of polluted-ness among objects. Whether an object is used, new and unopened or “like new” make a difference in perceived degrees of polluted-ness, as does the use of the object, the type and combination of types of pollution, and degree of clean-ability. The amount of physical dirt, degree of closeness to the body, and how closely an object is connected to the identity of its previous owner also influence degrees of polluted-ness.

There is also a need for more research on personhood and objects. The literature on personhood often ignores the importance of the context of the home, as well as multiple objects in this context to the creation of personhood. I examine personhood and objects in a different way than other studies in that those involved in estate sales do not have the physical person as a base to create this notion of who they are. They have only the objects they own and the contexts that surround them. This research adds to the literature on personhood and objects through examining how the personhood of a stranger can be created in their absence.

Through the estate sale, we can see how notions of personhood and pollution are bound together in objects. All objects that are out of place in the estate sale are polluted due to their connections to the person who previously owned them. Objects such as walkers and food remind people that someone has just died or moved from the house due to an illness. Objects such as underwear and bed sheets are polluted because they are associated with bodily emissions of and the closeness to their previous owner. Diaries, letters and photographs are polluted because they are so closely associated with the identity of their previous owner. Objects such as grimy pots and pans are out of place

because they are associated with the “dirt” of the person who owned them. Those involved in estate sales not only see these objects as polluted, they also use them to judge the person who owned them. If these physically dirty objects are purchased, they are purified through reappropriation or cleaning to rid “objects of the ‘contamination’ of the previous owner” (Clarke 2000: 97). This study provides a meeting ground for these two bodies of literature, and suggests that the two are related in ways that have not previously been explored.

Future directions in research may include more research on types of estate sales, the socioeconomic status of estate sale shoppers, and a systematic study of objects and personhood. It is not known whether there are two types of estate sales in all mid-sized cities, or whether this is unique to my research location. A systematic study of personhood and types of objects is also needed. Although all objects may be used to create the personhood of their previous owner, some objects may lend themselves more to this creation. Photographs and diaries, for instance, have a more obvious connection to their previous owner than mops. A study of multiple responses to the same object or type of object would show whether certain objects tell us more about a person than others.



Figure 5.5



Figure 5.6

I like estate sales because you get to look in someone's home and dig through their basement. I always get excited right before the sale opens, and my heart starts pounding. I start thinking about what will be in there and what treasures I will find. I love digging through all their stuff . . . Some of the most special things I have found are things I know the story behind, like my Niagara Falls motion lamp. I found out from the granddaughter that the lady who owned it was in her 80s, but she got the lamp from a vacation to the falls in 1954. She used to have it in her parlor, and she would turn it on for the grandkids when they came over. I also bought some of her old polyester shirts. It's kind of fun to know where they came from and who had them. I think about the lady when I turn my lamp on.

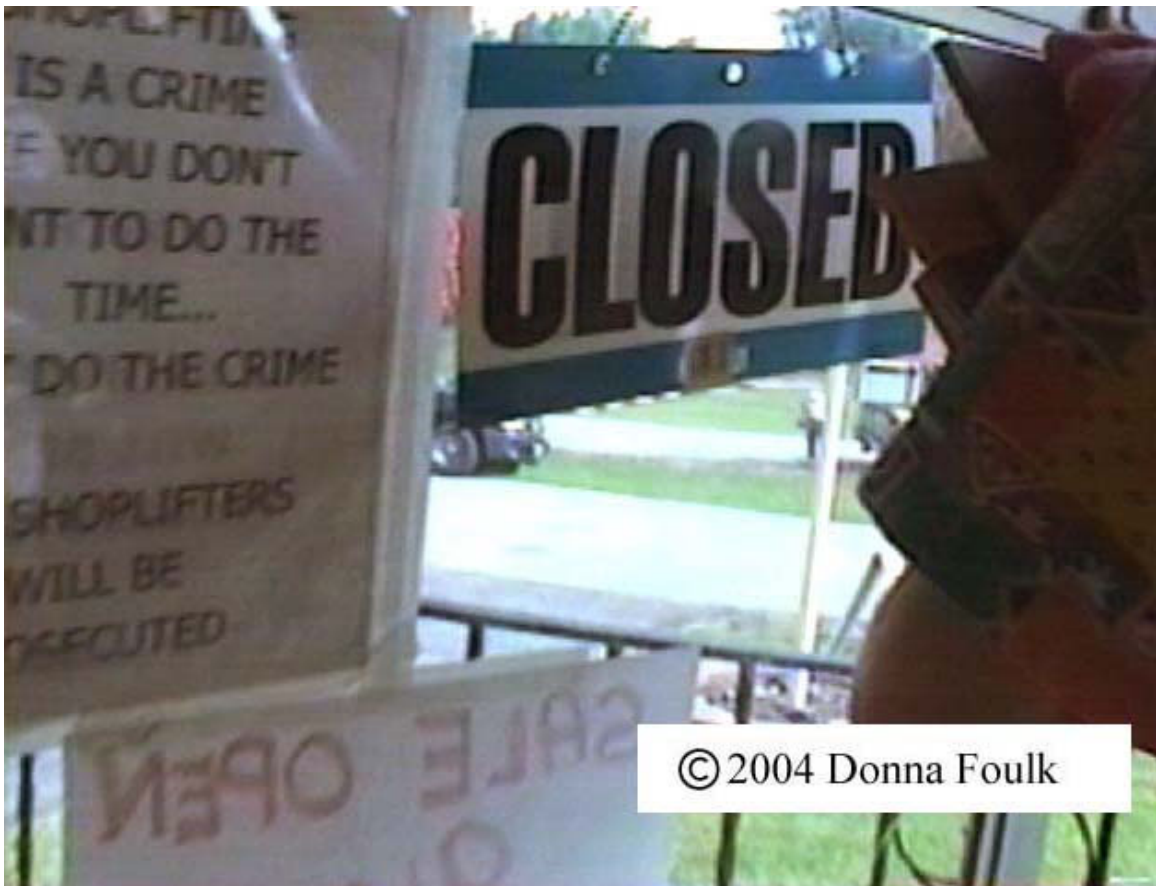


Figure 5.7

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide: Estate sale worker

How long have you been running estate sales?

How did you get into the business?

What do you like about running estate sales?

What do you not like?

Do you specialize in certain types of sales? Certain types of items?

Do you know who your customers are?

Are they mainly dealers, or do they buy things for themselves?

Why do you think they shop at estate sales as opposed to garage sale or other places?

Tell me how you set up for an estate sale.

From start to finish, how is the estate sale set up and run?

How do you decide where to put things?

When you find things in boxes/ closets/ attics, where do you put them? Why?

Are there certain places that you always put certain types of things?

Expensive items?

Types of things such as linens/ jewelry?

What do you not sell? Why?

Do you learn the stories behind any of the objects you sell?

What are some of those stories?

Is it important to you to know those stories?

Do you get a feeling for who lived here by going through their things?

What can you tell about them?

Some people have told me that it bothers them to go through people's closets and attics.

How do you feel about it?

(If they describe objects as treasures) I have heard a lot of antique dealers describe the things they buy and sell as "treasures." What do you think makes something a treasure?

I have also heard people talk about estate sale shopping as "treasure hunting."

Do you see it that way?

Why do you think that is?

Tell me about an interesting item you have found at an estate sale.

Why did you find it interesting?

[for those estate sales that I work at:]

(Discuss particular items as we set up the estate sale)

I am interested in what you think about certain objects. Can you tell me about the different items as we price and display them?

What does this [item] make you think of?

Does it make you think of a particular time/ place/ person/ event?

What do you think about as you are arranging and pricing things in a sale?

Do you think about the person who lived here?

Do you think about how the objects were used?

Do you think about how valuable an object is?

What makes an item valuable?

Interview Guide for Short Interviews: Estate Sale Shopper

Do you shop at estate sales to resell?

Do you buy things for yourself?

What do you like about shopping at estate sales?

What do you shop for? Why?

How did you get started going to estate sales?

Have you been to any other estate sales today/ this week?

What did you buy?

What will you do with it?

Tell me about what you are buying.

(if they describe objects as treasures) I have heard a lot of people describe the things they buy as “treasures.” What do you think makes something a treasure?

I have also heard people talk about estate sale shopping as “treasure hunting.”

Do you see it that way?

Why do you think that is?

Interview Guide

Key Shopper

Do you buy things at estate sales to resell?

Do you buy things for yourself?

How often do you shop at estate sales?

Do you shop at garage sales/ thrift stores too?

How are estate sales different?

What do you like about shopping at estate sales?

What do you shop for? Why?

How did you get started going to estate sales?

(if they describe objects as treasures) I have heard a lot of people describe the things they buy as “treasures.” What do you think makes something a treasure?

I have also heard people talk about estate sale shopping as “treasure hunting.”

Do you see it that way?

Why do you think that is?

(As we shop)

As we walk through the house, think out loud about what you see.

Tell me about the [item] you are buying/ looking at.

Why do you want to buy it?

What about it interests/ appeals to you?

What do you like about it?

Does it make you think of a particular time/ place/ person/ event?

What do you think about as you are walking through an estate sale?

Do you think about who lived here?

Do you think about how they used the things you see?

Do you think about the bargains you are getting?

Are there certain things that you don't buy/ look at?

Some people have told me that it bothers them to go through people's closets and attics.

How do you feel about it?

Do you get a feeling for the person who lived here by going through their house and their things?

What can you tell about them?

(After shopping, go through each item they bought. Have them show each item to the camera and describe it.)

(Follow them home/ to a shop/ wherever they end up putting the things they bought)

Tell me about each item you bought.

What will you do with it?

Tell me what you think of when you see the [item] in its new spot.

Tell me again what you like about this [item].

Is there anything else here that you have bought at an estate sale?

Do you remember where it came from?

What does it make you think of? Time/ place/ person/event?

APPENDIX B

Flyer

(distribute at estate sales that I work at)

I am conducting a thesis research project concerning the objects in estate sales. My thesis is about the meaning of objects before, during, and after estate sales. I am interested in finding several people that would like to talk to me about the objects they buy at estate sales.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or would like to know more about this project, please contact me: Donna Foulk [phone number] [email address] [mailing address]

Thank you!

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