

Preserving objects, preserving memories: repair professionals and object owners on the relation between memories and traces on personal possessions

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Preserving objects, preserving memories: repair professionals and object owners on the relation between memories and traces on personal possessions

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Abstract

Traces of ageing and use on the material of products, and memories associated with products, have been found to contribute to product attachment and can stimulate product longevity. We present findings of a qualitative study that focused on the relation between traces of ageing and use on personal possessions and memories and the effects of repair on objects. With this research, we intended to increase our understanding of the role of traces on personal possessions and memories. We interviewed five professionals at their workplace who worked as a restorer or did repairs of personal possessions, and five owners of a repaired or restored possession. The motivations for bringing an object for repair were not only related to the deteriorating condition of the object but were also triggered by situational events or circumstances, such as passing on ownership or knowing someone who could repair the object. We found five different categories of traces among the possessions of the interviewed object owners: Traces of use, traces of ageing, traces of repair, traces of accidents and alterations. We found that objects gained meaning after the repair. When object owners or repair professionals decided not to repair traces, it was often for aesthetic and reminding reasons, but also because it may be how the owner remembered the object. Traces can cue associations to their use in the past, and also to the (imagined) history of the objects. These findings indicate that repair can enhance the cueing of memories and that preservation of meaningful traces may contribute to attachment.

Introduction

Personal possessions can go through many material changes over time. For example, due to ageing, breakage, or usage and maintenance. Often possessions collect marks and traces or have undergone modifications during their lifetime. These references to time past are known to contribute to increased attachment to the object (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Kopytoff, 1986).

Not every trace of ageing and use is valued. The materials of objects play an important role in how ageing manifests itself on objects. Rognoli and Karana (2013) make a distinction between degrading and maturing of materials. Natural materials such as wood and leather may even improve their qualities over time and are often perceived as 'maturing'. Besides the appearance, also utility, enjoyment and memories are suggested to play a role in attachment (Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010; Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2008; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988).

Several studies indicated that especially for products that have been owned for a long time, memories are a major

reason for attachment (Niinimäki & Armstrong, 2013; Page, 2014; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008). In contrast, for more recently owned products these studies indicated that enjoyment and pleasure are the most prominent factors.

Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008, p.8) recommend that designers "facilitate the formation of associations between products and people, places or events (memories)". They proposed that designers could use materials that allow graceful ageing, or otherwise physical signs of past events, to facilitate the connections of memories to objects. This may increase the value of the product and its quality to cue memories. Also, Page (2014) found that "[p]roducts that had aged with dignity, showing the general wear and tear of use were often connected with fond stories and experiences" (Page, 2014, p. 279). These findings indicate that traces and ageing of the material contribute to cueing memories.

In this paper, we present a selection of the findings of a study that focused on the relation between traces of ageing

and use on personal possessions and memories. Memories are one of the reasons why people develop an attachment to personal items. By investigating traces of ageing and use on objects, we intend to increase our understanding of cuing memories and the role of traces in this, which may feed into the design of objects and technology to facilitate remembering (Van den Hoven & Eggen, 2014).

Method

For this study, we approached repair professionals, as we assumed they are experts on the topic of traces of use and ageing. We also interviewed object owners of repaired objects with traces of ageing and use. The research commenced after acquiring ethics approval from the university, and conducting a pilot study with a repair professional (furniture maker). We interviewed five professionals who worked as a restorer, renovator, conservator, or did otherwise repairs of personal possessions, and five owners of a repaired or repurposed possession. These owners were not necessarily customers of the interviewed professionals; in fact, only one object owner was recruited via one of the participating repair professionals. The professions that were included in this study were: a furniture maker, a clock maker, a doll and bear repairer, a silver, gold, and metalware restorer, and a ceramics restorer (see table 1).

The interview method we used for interviewing repair professionals is known as 'contextual inquiry', where participants are interviewed and observed in their own work environment (Wixon, Holtzblatt, & Knox, 1990). The method combines elements of ethnographic field research and participatory design (Holtzblatt & Jones, 1993; Raven & Flanders, 1996). Interviewing the repair professionals in their workplace allowed the interviewees to illustrate their answers with material and objects they work with.

Participants and data collection

The five repair professionals we interviewed worked in Sydney and surroundings (Australia) and had a long-standing experience in their profession of at least 25 years. Their age ranged from 43 to 69, four were male, and one was female. The interviews took approximately one hour on average, varying between 22 minutes to 98 minutes and were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Photos were

taken during the interview of objects that were pointed at or shown as examples when answering questions.

The interview questions covered topics such as the objects and the reparations or restorations they carried out, the meaning of the objects including memories, and the role of traces of ageing and use. Table 1 presents the objects the professionals covered and the types of traces these objects expose.

The object owners also lived in Sydney, were aged between 41 and 62, and three were female and two were male. Two object owners discussed two objects each, which led to seven objects in total. The object owners were interviewed either at the professional's workplace (1x), at the university (3x), or over the phone (1x). The interviews took approximately 37 minutes, varying between 32 and 46 minutes, and were recorded with a digital voice recorder. The objects discussed included a chest of drawers, an antique desk, a cabinet, a baby cot and changing table, a porcelain bowl, a porcelain doll, and a necklace (see table 2).

The questions asked to object owners covered topics about the history of the object, the meaningful properties to the owners, the traces of ageing and use on the object and the repair, and the meaning and memories the object evoked. The object owners were asked to send or bring a photo of the object to the interview if possible.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and the data was qualitatively analysed using open coding, following the bottom-up coding approach from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). The interviews from repair professionals and object owners were coded separately to allow for different perspectives to emerge. Coding first took place by hand, after which three topics (meaning of the objects and the reasons for repair, properties contributing to meaning, and role of traces of ageing and use) were selected to code in more depth with data analysis software NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2015). The initial codes were clustered or merged under themes. During the coding process, a few topics specific to either repair professionals or object owners were added when they seemed to be relevant for the research. The

#	Profession	Objects	Examples of traces
p1	Clockmaker	Clocks, watches, and music boxes (all from until the 1960's)	Damage of the surface (lacquer, paint), and wear of the mechanics
p2	Furniture restorer	Wooden furniture, sometimes statues	Broken parts, stained or damaged surfaces, moving parts do not function well (e.g. hinges of drawers or doors, parts that can open and close)
p4	Doll and bear repairer	Dolls, (teddy) bears, prams, wheel toys, and other toys	Paint, breakage, missing pieces (e.g. eyes, hair, or body parts), missing filling and fabric
p7	Metal-ware renovator	Silver and goldware, copper and brass, cutlery, candlesticks, trophies, ornaments, religious objects	Patina, fatigue of the metal, breakage, cracking and splitting, wear and tear of the surface, damage from over-cleaning, tarnish
p9	Ceramic restorer	Ceramic or porcelain objects such as ornaments, statues, china, lamps, vases, figurines, plates, cups, religious objects	Breakage, cracks, chips, missing pieces, stains (e.g. from food or rust), earlier repairs (glue, staples)

Table 1. Professions of the participating repair professionals and the objects they work with.

#	Object	Reason for repair	Current traces on the object
p3	Chest of drawers	Deteriorated, looked old and worn	Mark on the top where grandmother used to put the vase with flowers, shiny handles that do not belong to it, but were put on because grandmother liked it shiny (originally it was wood)
p5	Porcelain bowl	Broken when cat jumped on it	Crack from breakage, crazing of the porcelain
p5	Antique desk	Joints became wobbly and it eventually fell apart	Ink stains, scratches, wear of the wood
p6	Cabinet	Surface was scratched and looked worn	Veneer repair where colour does not match, parts of the brand label sanded away during repair, wear inside the drawers
p8	Necklace	String with beads broke (does not remember what happened)	Stiff compared to before repair, some scratches and perhaps a dent, little piece of string sticking out, it catches
p8	Porcelain doll	Maintenance, preserve it and display it at home	Missing foot of doll, discolouration of the dress (yellowing), tiny holes in the fabric of the shawl
p10	Baby cot and changing table made from parents' chair	Disassembled after clearance of parental house and repurposed pieces of wood when first grandchild was born	Chips off the wood

Table 2. Repaired objects from the participating object owners.

photos that were taken were not coded but used by the researcher to understand the transcripts.

Findings

We present a selection of our findings on the effects of repair and traces and the memories the objects and traces evoked, based on our interviews with repair professionals and object owners.

Motivation for repair

An important motivation to repair the object mentioned by both the repair professionals and object owners was the state of the object, such as breakage or objects that are not functioning. For example, a clock that has stopped working. A reason also was that the object had aesthetically deteriorated, for example if the object's surface was damaged, or *"because the lustre of it is gone"* [p2], and sometimes the object still looks good but is brought in for maintenance.

Repair professionals also mentioned that intentions to 'pass on ownership' prompted the owner to bring the object for repair. This could be to a person whom the owner has a close acquaintance with, such as when a grown-up child moves out of the house. It was also mentioned that owners restore their objects when they want to sell them, and thus 'pass on' to dispose of the object, or motivated by monetary reasons.



Figure 1. Owner learnt that the compartments in the antique desk were used to store money.

Knowing somebody in their personal circle who could do the repair was a particular motivation for object owners to repair the object. Talking to the person reminded them of having an object themselves that needed repair or restoration. For example, one of the participants met a repair professional through a date, another had a friend who was a repair professional.

Also, some item owners had objects that were stored away, and needed repurposing or conservation before it could be used or displayed again.

Effects of repair

We asked object owners if the meaning of the objects had changed after repair. Interestingly, all but one object gained additional or stronger positive meaning after the repair. The aesthetic improvements made by the professional gave stronger associations to its style, or a higher appreciation of the object. For example, an antique desk (see figure 1), gained historical meaning because the participant learnt about the history of the item. *"I didn't realise quite what the desk would have been used for. And now I see it, you know, as a money desk, [...] it has given me a little window into history that I didn't have."* [p5]

In a few cases, the repair also caused the loss of some qualities it had before. For example, the repair of a necklace caused a stiffness it did not have before breakage. Besides the personal meaning, participants also mentioned the item regained its functionality, including preserving it for the future and by being able to use the object again.

Types of traces

The object owners reported a variety of traces that were present on their items after repair (see table 3). The majority of traces were traces of use and traces of ageing. An interesting category of traces we observed were traces caused by the repair itself. For example, in the case of a repaired cabinet, where the new veneer not always matched the rest of the wood, and where the original label of the cabinet had been partly sanded away:

Traces of use (6x)	Traces of ageing (4x)	Traces of repair (3x)	Traces of accidents (2x)	Alteration (1x)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mark on surface where grandmother used to put the vase with flowers - Wear inside the drawers - scratches/dents - chips off the wood - Ink stains - Scratches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crazing of the porcelain - Discolouration/ yellowing of the dress - Tiny holes in the fabric of the shawl - Wear of the wood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Veneer repair where colour does not match - Parts of the brand label sanded away during repair - Stiff compared to before repair 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crack from breakage - Missing foot of doll (unclear where it is now) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shiny handles that do not belong on the chest of drawers, but were put on because grandmother liked it shiny (originally it was made of wood)

Table 3. Types of traces after repair of the seven objects in this study.

“You can actually see, he, in most cases he added the new veneer really really well. There is one whole section where actually the colour of the wood doesn’t really match. [...] he said he was really sorry that he did [...], he accidentally sanded a little bit of the label. You can see kind of where he tried to sand around it, and slightly missed it.” [p6]

Other instances of traces caused by the repair were when the repair or restoration did not come out as desired, for example, a doll’s dress that stayed more yellow compared to the previous time, when the owner washed the doll’s dress herself. Less frequent traces were traces of accidents and traces of alterations.

Not repairing traces

There was overlap in the reasons that repair professionals and object owners mentioned for deciding not to repair traces of ageing and use. Both groups mentioned that one reason was that improvements of repair did not outweigh costs or effort. Additionally, both groups mentioned that the traces of ageing and use were aesthetically appreciated, most owners do not want it to look like new. Besides the appreciation for the ageing, professionals also said that traces were kept because they reminded the owner of their past.

An interesting reason for not repairing the traces mentioned by a few participants is that the damage or traces had always been there, it was how they remembered the item. Regarding the missing foot of a porcelain doll (see figure 2) the owner said, among other reasons for not repairing it, *“it has never had it like that” [p8]*. The porcelain doll once had a second leg that is now missing, but it is not how the current owner remembers the object. Another



Figure 2. Porcelain doll with a missing foot.

participant explained that his grandfather had removed the original handles on a chest of drawers, because his grandmother liked shiny things. *“My grandfather put them on. I just remember I was polishing them. [...] I wouldn’t change it for the world.” [p3]* Although not originally part of the object, they are kept and refer to the owner’s childhood memories.

Traces and memories

Professionals mentioned many examples where traces acted as a reminder of the past, which was also a reason for keeping the traces, and the traces often referred to events or activities that caused the traces, including the person involved in this activity. For instance, a grandmother who caused a burning mark in the table with a hot iron, a layer of scale in a kettle due to the use of clay water from the area where the family lived, or children’s Beatrix Potter bowls where the rubbing of the surface reminds them of the use when the children were little.

Also for some object owners, the still visible traces (after repair) played a role in remembering how they or their family members had used the object. For example, the mark on the surface where grandmother put the vase with flowers, and the scratches on the wood where the participant and his siblings, contrary to the wishes of their parents, would sit with their buckled sandals when they were little. Traces also referred to the past of the object without the owner being involved. The traces evoked awareness of the long life of the object, that it had been part of other people’s lives (and being cared for), and its purpose of use in the past. Only in one instance the traces referred to a negative connotation, scratches and changes on a necklace that were simply ‘annoying’.

Conclusions

We presented a selection of the findings of a qualitative study that focused on the relation between traces of ageing and use on personal possessions and memories. The study involved interviews with repair professionals and owners of a repaired object. With these findings, we gained insights on the effects of repair and traces on objects.

There were five categories of traces that were found on the objects of the participating owners in this study. Most were traces of use and traces of ageing, but also repair left traces on the object. Almost all participants mentioned that their objects gained meaning after the repair of the object.

Damage or traces were not always corrected by the repair professional, as people appreciate the traces aesthetically, or it serves as a reminder of the past, or simply because the improvements do not outweigh the costs. Also, how an object is remembered by the current owner plays a role, as some participants prefer to restore it to the state they remember it, even if that is not how the object originally looked like. Traces seemed to refer to activities or events that caused the traces, and also evoked a general awareness of the object's past.

These findings suggest that repair can enhance associations to the past, and that preservation of meaningful traces may facilitate the cuing of memories.

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