Understanding Material Culture
Ch 7

# SEVEN

# Material Culture and Identity. Objects and the Self

**SUMMARY OF CHAPTER CONTENTS**

This chapter surveys a range of material that looks at how objects are used at an individual level, principally in the identity-related task of understanding oneself. The chapter has five main sections which:

- define identity and its major dimensions, and establish how objects assist in the formation and performance of self and social identities
- introduce object-relations and psychoanalytic theory to illustrate some of the important psychodynamic relations between people and objects, with special reference to D.W. Winnicott's idea of transitional objects
- review explanatory theories of consumption which have underlying psychological components centred around Baudrillard's notion of 'lack'
- use the example of youth sub-cultures to show how collective identities are established through the working out of norms and values through particular objects
- review research material on objects as self-extensions.

## Objects and identity

How and why do people use objects as aids to developing, presenting and managing their identity – the psycho-social activity of understanding who they are, and letting others know who they are? We are defined as people not only by what we think and say, but by what material things we possess, surround ourselves with, and interact with: our clothes, shoes, personal technologies like mobile telephones or PDAs, and so on. All of these material things help to establish, mediate and assist us in the performance of our personal and social identities.

You will recall that a fundamental principle of material culture studies is that objects have the ability *to stand for other things* – or establish social meanings – on behalf of, or more precisely *along with* people. The theoretical principles upon which this claim is based have already been touched upon, but are worth briefly revisiting. In the previous chapter, we saw how Goffman distinguished between objects that allow for social confirmation of *categorical status* (such as a uniform), and objects that afford *expressiveness*, which he saw as reflecting a person's style of life, preferences, or personal tastes – in effect what we could understand as their identity. Along similar lines, Harré (2002) distinguishes between the *functional* and *expressive* orders of objects. While the former order relates to the functional purpose to which an object can be put, the latter capacity relates to social hierarchies of status and honour, which individuals negotiate. Harré (2002: 32) comments: 'Material things can be understood in their full human significance only if their roles in both these orders are identified. A Maserati Biturbo Quattroporte is a useful device for bringing the weekly groceries home from the supermarket. It is also a visible expression of wealth, style and so on'. This chapter will look more closely at the links between objects and identity, but before progressing with this task, the first thing that needs to be agreed upon is exactly what identity is, its definition and major components.

## Defining identity

Identity is a modern conceptual construct used in the social and behavioural sciences to refer to people's sense of themselves as distinct individuals in the context of community. At a basic level, we could say that identity refers to people's socially determined sense of who they are – like a social statement of *who one is*. Referring to the distinct features and attributes of self, such as personality traits or values, identity is what distinguishes oneself from another person. It includes the personal sense someone has of themselves as an individual, with particular corporeal and emotional qualities. It also includes a person's location within society, especially the multiple types of social roles they can occupy and perform at different times and places, for example, as student, partner, father, boyfriend and so on.

Sociologists and social-psychologists typically think about three aspects of identity: (i) *social or objective* identity, referring to a person's belonging to various social groups, and the distinguishing socially relevant features of such belongings, for example like gender, social class or ethnicity; (ii) *self or subjective* identity, referring to the unique combination of one's personal features, traits and preferences; and (iii) *ego* identity, referring to the feeling one has of knowing who they are and how they 'fit in', giving the person a sense of stability and continuity that helps to sustain their

outlooks and actions. In reality, separating out these elements as discrete aspects of identity is difficult. Contemporary understandings of identity emphasise that having an identity means belonging to multiple groups, performing a variety of roles, drawing various resources from each of these networks, and from society broadly (e.g. media discourses) to forge a sense of self.

Essentially, it is this *expressive capacity* of objects that affords individuals the opportunity to articulate aspects of self through material engagements, in an attempt to communicate something *about* – and indeed *to* – themselves. Objects have the capacity to do 'social work'. Objects might signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, wealth, participation in a leisure activity, or an aspect of one's social status – all aspects of *social identity*. On the other hand, objects also carry personal, cultural and emotional meanings, related to *subjective identity* – they can facilitate interpersonal interaction, and help a person to act upon him or herself. For example, wearing certain clothing may make a person feel empowered by changing their self-perception. Objects, then, can assist in forming or negating interpersonal and group attachments, mediating the formation of self-identity and esteem, and integrating and differentiating social groups, classes or tribes. The actual qualities of these objects do not always matter greatly for sociality, and may be secondary to its possession. At some level it is the mere *possession* of the thing that matters for people's attachment to material objects (Dittmar, 1992: 9). The fact that one has exclusive control and ownership of an object is the crucial aspect mediating the boundaries between self (who controls the object) and the other (who doesn't). In this way, *possession* of the object *affords* cultivation of *identity*, sometimes irrespective of an object's aesthetic or functional qualities.

## Identity and late-modern society: the emergence of identity as 'capital'

The postmodern perspective on consumption, which dominated the intellectual landscapes of the 1980s and 1990s, took the ability of consumption to signify identity to an extreme. In radically turning Marxist and critical perspectives on their heads, postmodern accounts emphasised consumption freedoms, largely unfettered personal choice, and consumption as a form of play. The gist of the postmodern claim is that consumption exists within a culture of hyper-commodification, where newness, beauty and status are god-like in the minds of consumers, and are the keys to forming one's identity. The contrast made commonplace in commentary on consumption processes is that if consumption could ever be characterised in historical perspective as strictly utilitarian or functional, then by contrast it is now characteristically self-constructive: identity-forming, reflexive, expressive and even playful.

The postmodern mode of expressive, identity-forming consumption has been enabled by a number of large-scale social changes. First, the widespread, frenetic commodification of all spheres of human life has encouraged people to purchase the most fundamental human needs of self-worth, love, sex and happiness, through commodities. Associated with this – the argument goes – we live in an era where our self-identity is created or discovered, and constantly monitored, relatively free from the constraints of social class, family and work life. Being responsible for our own identities, people use the abundant resources of consumer markets to construct a viable identity, based around the skilful assemblage of certain commodities which assist in building a sort of commodified self. Third, commodities are not desired purely, or even mostly, for their function, but have become aestheticised. That is – consistent with Baudrillard's thesis about sign value being paramount – objects must look good, as well as work. All sorts of consumer goods come to mind to illustrate this dictum: watches, shoes, mobile telephones, domestic lighting and so on, are all resolutely functional consumer objects that have been thoroughly *aestheticised*. Finally, there is evidence of a fragmentation of old hierarchies of cultural tastes, meaning pop-culture objects and even 'kitsch' objects can have as much aesthetic cachet as objects valued by the upper-classes, depending on social context. This has meant that products easily available to everyday consumers can be seen as 'art', and contribute to a credible personal style. For example, think of many of the cheap, cheeky and clever goods made by the French designer Philippe Starck. In part, social status involves the masterly manipulation of symbols in order to establish one's good taste, discernment or superior cultural style. Clever consumers, especially youth within particular sub-cultures, have usurped the link between high levels of personal style or taste and wealth. In our consumer culture, a person doesn't need a Rolls-Royce and a country-estate to establish their personal style and good taste. Establishing superior style can now be done through a cool pair of old sneakers, some faux rich jewellery purchased from a flea market, a retro pair of sunglasses and a cheap 1980s styled, electronic watch. Or, at least that's what the new rules of our consumer culture tell us.

Picking up on the dimensions of these new social formations and patterns that de-emphasise structure, regulation and universal life paths, James Côté (1996: 424) proposes that late-modern society requires individuals to cultivate and apply forms of 'identity capital', which he takes to refer to the 'wherewithal individuals use when … they attempt to negotiate the tricky passages created by the obstacles of late-modern society'. Côté's (1996) 'identity capital' thesis suggests that in late-modern culture individuals have the potential to develop situated, contextual modes of self-presentation that are reflexive and self-monitoring, allowing ease of forms of 'cultural mobility' through time and space. Identity capital constitutes investments people build in themselves, which assist them in making their way in a variety of personal and professional arenas they aspire belonging to. This variant of capital includes things like: development of social and technical skills, enhanced behavioural repertoires, and associations within networks. One could add that the possession of particular object tokens that afford desired identities could be included as part of the 'tangible resources' for identity capital Côté refers to (1996: 426). Such material tokens – the right 'look', clothes, jewellery, motor vehicle, and so on – all become passports into desired social, cultural and institutional spheres.

### *What can objects do for our social and personal identity?*

All of the previous discussion suggests that in contemporary society objects can play a very important role in establishing our social and personal identities. In terms of social identity, objects can *stand for* particular features of a person, in the absence of interpersonal contact. Thus, visually identifying an object within someone's possession can tell us much about a person, without us having to speak to him or her to confirm such a status. In terms of personal identity, objects *assist the credible, effective performance* of an identity – they are integral parts of an effective social performance whereby objects (seem to) fuse with their possessors in order to offer a convincing social performance. It should be noted that there are some important cautions against easily accepting this view, however, which really suggests the need for a better specified model of the communicative aspects of objects. For example, Colin Campbell (1996) cautions against the idea that goods necessarily or simply communicate some aspect of a person's identity. For many consumers, it may be the case that buying new clothes is strongly associated with an item of clothing meeting functional requirements (for example, such as comfort, being right for a particular task like gardening or jogging, able to be worn to work). Also, it is difficult for us to assume the reasons why a person is wearing what they are, even the person themselves may not be aware of the reasons as they may wear things habitually, or 'automatically'. Then, even when clothing-conscious people do choose particular outfits, with particular features, colours, cuts and shapes, and so on, it is unclear how such ensembles are 'read' by others. All in all, while it is plausible to assume objects like clothing relate to a person's social identity and are actively chosen, it is more difficult to describe and explain such a process in precise detail, especially when it is complicated across multiple time–space contexts. The next sections of this chapter survey the literatures which in some way show that material culture is crucial to identity, along the way helping to specify some of the processes at play. We turn first to look at how objects assist important dimensions of human psychological development.

## Object-relations and psychoanalytic theory: the role of objects in human psychological development

The social and human sciences tend to focus on the socially and culturally communicative properties of material culture. Indeed, this has been the predominant theme of the current work, which seeks to review and represent these traditions. This focus within the human sciences has been at the expense of meaning-centred analyses of objects, and more so at the expense of individual-centred approaches which investigate the motivations, drives and attachments between individuals and objects.

The associated pros and cons are, briefly, thus. It is correct that the selling machinery of advanced capitalism makes consumer objects more and more available, marketing them vigorously and ingeniously in order to sway consumer preferences. But then, such objects clearly have great emotional and cultural power for users, who project their own meanings onto any given object and in turn they incorporate things into their self. The advantage of psycho-cultural approaches is they investigate some of the emotional or personal reasons for attachments. Making use of a psychodynamic approach could be especially useful in consumption studies, where a range of pivotal theories of *why* people consume make suggestive, tentative use of psychological and psychodynamic approaches. A more rigorous application may yield useful insights.

The following section outlines some key tenets of the 'object-relations' school of psychoanalytic theory that are useful for studying material culture. Before doing so, one area of potential misunderstanding needs to be cleared up: the 'objects' in object-relations theory are not always or necessarily hard, material things, though they can be. An object within this theoretical tradition can be a person, a part of another person, or indeed an item of material culture. In suggesting the application of this tradition of psychoanalytic theory to the study of material culture we can make general use of the theoretical endeavours recently charted by sociologically oriented psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow (1999, 2004) who argues the efficacy of paying attention to the internal worlds of fantasy and affect to explain individual experience and action, and also cultural complexity. She suggests that all social and cultural experiences are transformed through people's psychic lens: people are historically located, but psychodynamically create a sense of meaning and selfhood. Chodorow's elegant summary of the psychodynamic perspective is instructive:

> People create and experience social processes and cultural meanings psychodynamically – in unconscious, affect-laden, non-linguistic, immediately felt images and fantasies that everyone creates from birth, about self, self and other, body, and the world – as well as linguistically, discursively, in terms of a cultural lexicon. Social processes are given, and they may lead to some patterns of experiencing in common, but this experiencing will be as much affective and non-linguistic as cognitive. (Chodorow, 2004: 26)

Important work originating from psychoanalytic theory, coming under the rubric of object-relations theory, is a potentially fruitful area for new research innovations within material culture studies. Object-relations theory can be considered a sort of modern adaptation of the Freudian psychoanalytic approach. Sigmund Freud originally used the term 'object' to refer to anything (not necessarily a material object) that a person used in order to satisfy drives. So, in Freud's sense, objects are targets towards which people directed their desire for instinctual satiation. For Freud, these were of two main types: libidinal and aggressive. Object-relations theory moves away from the somewhat reductionist approach of Freud's libidinal theory, to an emphasis on the use of objects in establishing relationships for certain types of emotional sustenance, psychological development, or need. The emphasis in object-relations theory is therefore on fixing upon objects that satisfy key relationship needs. People choose certain objects from within their environment to develop, manage and mediate their sense of self, others and the external environment.

The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein distinguished between part-objects and whole-objects. For example, a parent would be a whole-object, while the particular bodily part of the mother's breast would be a part-object. Klein's point is that all human drives become directed or centred around such objects. Once again, the object which affords psychological sustenance and growth need not be a particular material object, though it could be. Thus, within object-relations theory, objects can be people (such as one's mother, or partner) or material things (such as so-called 'transitional objects' with which we form attachments). These objects and a person's relationship with them are incorporated into a sense of self, becoming integral parts of maturing personhood. For example, children form relationships with toys, which act as transitional objects in the formation of the child's sense of self. As adults, some people form strong relationships with food and alcohol, which are objects used to service or overcome their anxieties or grief. Adults also have a range of special objects, to which they feel attached: a favourite mug, a photograph, a special item of clothing, a pen, item of jewelry, and so on. So the term 'object' is more inclusive for understanding how humans form and preserve a sense of self, as well as relationships with others, through forming relationships with a variety of object things. Within psychoanalytic theory this tendency to invest objects with power and energy – meaning – is called *cathexis*.

## *Transitional objects and human development: a life-long search for meaningful objects?*

D.W. Winnicott's (1971[1953]: 1) elucidation of the idea of the 'transitional object' is an important early statement in object-relations theory that still has relevance. Winnicott noted that around the second half of their first year infants become fond of holding and playing with objects. He specifically suggested many infants become attached to dolls, but the repertoire of objects probably extends further than this, to whatever is within their reach. These objects become special objects for the infant, perhaps even objects to which the infant appears 'addicted'. Winnicott argues that it is not just that the infant seeks oral excitement and pleasure from fondling objects, or that fondling diminishes an infant's anxiety, but *the object they attach to offers deeper psychological gratification* around the psychic satisfaction of learning about self, and others. Winnicott says that engagements with objects occur within 'potential spaces', which are a type of intermediate space somewhere between subject and object – not the individual subject, nor the external object environment, but the spaces of creativity and play that are created when both meet. Winnicott says that potential space is at 'the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control' (1971[1953]: 100). Within this space, objects are 'imaginatively elaborated', or invested with meaning through cathexis (1971[1953]: 101).

According to Winnicott's theory, such playing with objects assists in the development of a 'personal pattern' through the infant's capacity to recognise the object as *'not-me'*. This is an important realisation, for it permits the infant to recognise the boundaries or borders or their self through handling/sucking/throwing the object. It also confirms to the infant that they can manipulate their environment (for pleasure, comfort and satisfaction), and that they are indebted to others by forging bonds of reciprocity and learned manners (for example, through the way parents frequently encourage an infant to say 'ta' after accepting an object). The object therefore assists in teaching the child important lessons.

A couple of fundamental psychoanalytic processes are at play in all types of human relations with objects (Chodorow, 1999: 15). The first is *projection*. When we project, we put our own feelings, beliefs, or parts of self into another person or object. The second is *introjection*, where elements of an object are taken into the self. There is thus a *dialectic of transference* of energies at play in people–object relations. On the one hand people *project onto* objects particular meanings, fantasies, desires and emotions, and on the other, objects are being *taken into* the self, used, elaborated, played with and eventually exhausted. We can see how such theoretical resources can be of use for inquiries into the nature of consumer societies, especially people's desires for consumer objects. It suggests that people seek objects in order to cultivate/satiate desires and needs, and that particular objects are sought out because they are invested with particular meanings that tap into these desires, needs and fantasies. In suggesting this, such approaches take us away from emphases on the social and cultural dynamics of social communication, honour and status, fashionability and cultural capital. Yet, they allow us to get to the core of questions of human desire for objects of consumer culture, potentially complementing the focus on traditional sociological questions of consumption and social difference. Some of the sociological material which gestures in this direction is discussed in the next section.

## Psychological lack and consumption: objects and desire

Given the sociological tendency to explain consumption through the logic of class and group membership analysis, it is not surprising that even though studies of emotion and embodiment have gained greater currency within social theory generally, this has not yet had a significant effect on the consumption studies literature (see Boden and Williams, 2002). In part, this has to do with the intellectual trajectory of consumption studies. As Miller (1995) has pointed out, and has been discussed earlier in the current work, there has been a reliance on a reductionist paradigm which posits consumerism as either a social and personal 'bad', the lineage of which can be traced from Marx through twentieth-century varieties of critical thought such as Marcuse, and Horkheimer and Adorno (as reviewed in the first section of the current work); or as a potentially liberating 'good', interpreted through the lens of theorists such as de Certeau, Benjamin and Shields. While theoretically enabling, neither position has encouraged a complex view of consumption practice.

This relative paucity of investigation into the interaction between emotion, self and consumption in social research is surprising given the fact that a small number of persuasive and influential attempts to actually explain the sustained existence of the cultural ethic of consumerism have employed strong social-psychological, emotional orientations in their explanations. Prominent in this field are Baudrillard's (1996[1968]) theory of a psychological 'lack' at the core of consumerist psychology, Campbell's (1987) account of the self-sustaining, autonomous ethic of consumerist desire, and McCracken's (1988) theory of consumption as an act of 'displaced meaning'. An important caveat is apt at this point. Reading these works one picks up strongly on such psychodynamic and psycho-social aspects – it should be noted such theoretical influences are not developed as an explicit part of the authors' theoretical model. It is important to note therefore that these authors are not necessarily psychoanalytic in their approach. What is correct, however, is that in a crucial part of their explanation and analysis of consumption they do encourage a focus upon deep psychological/ideational meanings driving consumption that could assist in the development of such an approach.

It is the rather psychically chilling idea of 'lack' that is at the core of Baudrillard's writings on the nature of consumption practice in a consumer society (1996[1968]). We require some brief revision of Baudrillard's ideas from his work *The System of Objects* before moving to the main point. At the base of Baudrillard's analysis of consumerism is the theory that while we may consume physical objects, in fact we are really consuming *the idea of an object*. These ideas are tied to inner motivations and drives, rather than utility. Baudrillard's point is that objects eventually, inevitably, perpetually disappoint – they never really satisfy the deep psychological needs that direct us toward them in the first instance. Consumption and consumer capitalism is thus founded upon a *psychological lack* that it perpetually stimulates, but cannot satiate. The possession of objects is not just about *having*, but *being*. Thus, to talk about 'my car', 'my shoes', 'my i-Pod', 'my earrings', and so on is to bring objects into our own possession and domination, projecting our own feelings onto a particular object that we use *in order to be who we are* (Baudrillard, 1996[1968]: 101). Baudrillard's (1996[1968]: 204) pessimism about this type of unquenchable need for objects is cavernous, and his indebtedness to psychoanalytic variants of critical theory and Marxism is apparent when he says that consumption has a dynamic derived from the 'ever-disappointed project now implicit in objects'. Furthermore, the motivation to consume comes from a deep, 'disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life' – a cavernous, irrepressible, 'lack' (1996[1968]: 205). With such gloom and barrenness, the reason for Baudrillard's postmodern turn may well be clear.

McCracken's (1988) theory of displaced meanings is similar to Baudrillard's notion of lack, though better specified. McCracken also postulates a psychological motivation for consumption. In his theory, a chronic aspect of the psycho-social aspect of everyday life is the gap that exists between the real and ideal in people's everyday lives; in consumer societies the pursuit of desirable objects is an important resource for making bridges between the real and ideal. Dreaming and fantasising – and drawing upon advertising discourses and the real or imagined lives of others – are important, for it is in this imagined domain that people come to define and build up their notion of an ideal. In consumer societies, objects come to represent a bridge from the real to the ideal. Objects are resources that attract meaning for people. It is on particular objects that people tag their hopes, dreams and desires. The psychological pang comes when people acquire elements of their dream, as represented in objects, and invariably discover that their lives soon settle back to a mundane reality. After a short high, the theory postulates that people realise their 'dream consumer object' does not satiate a deep, inner dissatisfaction. At this point, the cycle of dreaming for newness begins again.

Campbell's (1987) theory is even more elaborate and ambitious, primarily because of the historical argument it is predicated upon. Campbell's thesis is that, alongside the bourgeois, rationalist and technical ethic which characterised Weber's theory of capitalist development, there is a romantic, pleasure-seeking, hedonistic spirit which drives modern consumerism. Central to the cultural complex of consumerism is day-dreaming, fantasising and self-delusion. A major part of consumption is imagination – consumers desire objects because they believe them to offer something novel, empowering or edifying. People do not thus have an actual desire for acquisition of objects *per se*, but the acquisition of 'dreams and the pleasurable dramas which they have already enjoyed in imagination' (Campbell, 1987: 90). As in McCracken's theory, so too for Campbell, purchase simply eventually leads to further disappointment, and the cycle of longing and desire begins again. This is the sublime power of the consumer society – to offer objects that promise meaning and satisfaction, but ultimately fail to satiate at the deepest level, over a long time period. As beings that crave continual confirmation of identity and honouring of the self, it is only reasonable that humans search for, and find some, satisfaction in using objects for the purpose of managing such demands of their psyche.

## Youth culture and objects

Within the British cultural studies tradition there have been a range of important ethnographic studies into the lives of various marginal groups, especially young people. These have taken as one of their main goals to show how members of such sub-cultural communities construct meanings to differentiate themselves from mainstream groups. Rather than being a sign of selling-out, or submission to dominant ideologies, such studies take youth sub-cultural forms like fashion or music to represent types of resistance and political action. For example, in Chapter 4, we considered Dick Hebdige's analysis of youth sub-cultural styles, which illustrated how the semiotic 'command' of objects like safety pins, ripped shirts, leather belts and so on, enabled youth to symbolically challenge conventional stereotypes and mores. Within punk sub-culture, for example, the emphasis was on having objects 'out of place' – consequently disturbing semiotic coherence and the 'natural order' of things – in order to give an object a threatening type of cultural power. Another scholar in the same tradition is Paul Willis, whose ethnographic studies of 'profane' or 'common' culture showed how what were apparently the most mundane elements of everyday life were open to subversive symbolic usage via creative acts of appropriation. Such acts of appropriation were most effective when they deployed the symbols of the dominant classes. Consumer objects can be taken out of context, developed and repossessed to express something very different to that which they were originally intended. In his book *Profane Culture*, Willis (1978: 7) writes:

> ...these cultures teach us that revolutionary cultural change will only come from reinterpretations, reformations of consciousness, and fermentation from below around the most trivial, everyday and commonplace items .... It concerns thinking and feeling and how things are seen: new eyes on old objects.

In his ethnography of 'the motor-bike boys' Willis found the 'motor-bike object' as the central stylistic focus of bike culture. Much of the culture o the group he studied was taken up discussing aspects of motor-bikes their style, capacity, features, handling and ride, and so on. Within th group, an individual's status was accorded in part by the type of bike the rode, and their levels of competence around riding and mechanica knowledge. And more than this, *the type of experiences* one has with a bik accorded status within the group: the breadth, depth and associated under standing one had which was akin to a type of citizenship within the bikin community. The motor-bike was the perfect material accompaniment – o equivalent – to the broader cultural universe of the motor-bike boy

While the boys were masculinist, direct, physical and respectful of status, 'the solidity, responsiveness, inevitableness, the strength of the motor-bike matched the concrete, secure nature of the bikeboys' world' (Willis, 1978: 53). Willis continues, making the links between the object and the identity of the bikeboys explicit:

> It underwrote in a dramatic and important way their belief in the common-sense world of tangible things, and the secureness of personal identity. The roughness and intimidation of the motor-bike, the surprise of its fierce acceleration, the aggressive thumping of the unbaffled exhaust, matches and symbolizes the masculine assertiveness, the rough camaraderie, the muscularity of language, of the style of social interaction. (Willis, 1978: 53)

Willis saw the motor-cycle impacting on the full range of the cultural register. Its mechanical qualities were recognised and to be understood, and an important part of attaining status within the group. Its mechanical qualities were also incorporated into a mode of understanding one's experiences on the bike: how it rode, handled and responded was important. In the end however, it is not a cybernetic relationship: 'bike' and 'boy' do not merge. Rather, the drive was to practically and symbolically 'control' the bike, to make it a distinctive and meaningful cultural construction. In the end, this anthropomorphised (to give something human qualities) the cycle: effectively honouring it equal communicative status within the bikeboy's cultural universe.

Within the field of youth and risky behaviours, Cynthia Lightfoot (1997) links risk-taking to the development of youth identity. Risks are not plain stupid, meaningless or nihilistic, but serve much the same function as Winnicott's 'transitional objects' discussed earlier in this chapter: they offer young people an opportunity to apprehend their own identities, feelings, desires and fears, within the context of their peers: 'worn like badges – of autonomy, or defiance, or group membership – risks are declarations of the self' (Lightfoot, 1997: 9). Lightfoot talks about how within their peer group, adolescents go about constructing new *talismans*: objects of status marked with culturally approved magic signs, which are seen to confer on its bearer supernatural powers. While engagements with such 'talisman' objects come about within the context of play and fantasy, they are powerful forms of expressing youth identities: 'adolescents are makers of new talismans. The clothes they wear; their music and media choices, their language and slang, their hangouts: all of these are forms expressing who they are, and who they would like to be' (Lightfoot, 1997: 9).

## Objects as extensions of self

Russell Belk's (1988) extensive, interdisciplinary essay on possessions and how they 'extend self' is the key work in this field. Belk makes the point

that human beings are more than their physiology – their bodies and their minds. People value very highly and extremely personally objects in their external environment, especially those they deem to 'possess'. At one level, these things are purely technological and functional – they assist people to undertake social action with greater efficacy, and across time and space (for example, a mobile telephone, motor vehicle, or an electronic diary assistant). More than this, external objects take on deeper meanings – they can afford a variety of projections. The psychologist William James asserts that the self – who 'I' am – is understood not just to be 'Me', as in my body and my thoughts, but also what is 'mine'. So, effectively, James understands that we cannot separate selfhood from things external to it, which a person believes and acts *as if* a thing is equivalent to their self. Hence, a human being's world of meaning extends well beyond their empirical self, to objects, things and other people in their environment. On the way external objects become associated with selfhood, James says: 'we feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves' (William James, in Belk, 1988: 140).

Psychological research backs up James' theories about where people believe their 'self' begins and ends. It suggests objects and things are very much a part of people's sense of self. Belk (1988) reports Prelinger's research on limits to selfhood that shows people tend to understand themselves first and foremost as embodied, though objects also rank highly in significance. In order of ranked importance, people imagine their self as: specific body parts (eyes, face, legs), psychological processes of their mind (like a person's beliefs, values or their conscience), their personal identifying attributes (age, occupation), their possessions (watch, computer, CDs), abstract ideas (one's moral viewpoints), other people (partner, parents), objects within one's close physical environment (pens, lamps, books), followed finally by objects within distant environments (where one has travelled, one's workplace). Interestingly, note how the possessions category ranks more highly than 'other people' in imagining the self, suggesting the strong importance of objects. A potential factor at work in this ranking is the degree of personal control people perceive they have over things, which influences their perceptions of the relative closeness of these components of self. People can personally control objects more than they can other people, and hence feel a closer attachment to them. Thus, the more we believe we possess, or are possessed by an object, the closer we feel it to be part of our selves (Belk, 1988: 141). Summarising, Belk (1988) concludes on the basis of his review that the following are perceived by people as important components of self, in ranked order of importance: body; internal processes; ideas and experiences; persons, places and things we feel attached to. The following sections review research which looks into various dimensions which structure the relationships between the self and objects.

## Favourite objects, treasured possessions and meaning creation

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) interviewed over 300 people from 82 different families within the Chicago City area for their influential study that set out to empirically account for the transactions between people and objects within homes. Their research approach is underpinned by a belief that objects are symbols that can tell researchers who people are, who they have been, and who they wish to become. When asked what things in their homes were most important to them, and why, respondents reported the following categories most frequently. This list is followed with a brief summary of the major reasons why they nominated this object:

1 furniture (chairs, sofas and tables that fill the home, providing comfort, structuring routine and sometimes embodying memories)
2 visual art (paintings and posters that have aesthetic and stylistic value but equally importantly refer to memories, familial attachments and values of the self)
3 photographs (of family and loved ones, preserving memory, personal ties and suggesting perpetual presence of departed kin)
4 books (these refer to one's past achievements, current interests and are tokens that represent one's ideals and values)
5 stereo (music is an important mood moderator for many people and an important referent for people's identity)
6 musical instruments (an important symbol of a person's creative expression and a referent for their enjoyment of music, sometimes refers to a past interest one has had to give up)
7 TV (like music, TV helps to moderate moods and provide enjoyment, it also provides an artificial form of sociality for those who live alone)
8 sculpture (three-dimensional artefacts, standing for family relationships, cherished experiences, and sometimes aesthetic qualities)
9 plants (provide an opportunity for people to care for something, growing healthy plants represent a personal accomplishment and refer to people's sense of connection with the environment)
10 plates (includes heirlooms, gifts, exotic objects and curios which tie one to others and refer to significant events in one's life).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) also found important differences in how objects were cherished across the life-course. On the basis of their generational sampling approach, they suggest a master binary scheme for interpreting age-related differences between: (i) objects that are cherished for affording of *action* (for example, a ball, or a bike, or a kite), and (ii) objects that are cherished for affording *contemplation* (for example, a photograph, an old plate, a sculpture). The objects young people and children tend to nominate as their most cherished are things that cultivate or encourage action – they are instruments for *doing*, and require physical manipulation and engagement, such as musical instruments, sports equipment, bikes and skateboards. On the other hand older people, the grandparents within the study sample, tend to cherish objects that require mostly mental and emotional engagement, such as photographs. The middle generation tended to nominate objects toward the contemplative end of the spectrum, resembling the older generation within the sample. The general trend the authors identify is for meanings of objects to shift over time, from what one can do with an object to what one has done in the past. Thus, as one gets older objects serve to connect one with the past, affording continuity of self into the future presumably as one's life changes, becoming more challenging and more complex in various ways. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton are careful to point out that such a binary distinction between action and contemplation can be misleading. For example, both older and younger generations ranked the stereo highly as a cherished object. In such a case, the object can clearly afford a range of meanings, and can be used flexibly by people to suit their needs. For the young person the stereo thus plays the latest pop songs, loudly, energetically and urgently; while for the older person it can induce sentimental moods or be a source of relaxation. The authors suggest more broadly that this 'decentring' of cherished objects – from objects that directly and physically engage self to objects that link self to others – corresponds to Piaget's stage model of cognitive development.

Laura Kamptner (1995) researched the treasured possessions of adolescents. Kamptner was interested not only in the range of treasured objects, but the reasons why people nominated such possessions. Kamptner found that adolescent males listed the following categories of objects, in order, as their most treasured: music (CD player, musical instruments), sports equipment (from surfboards to baseball bats), motor vehicles, small appliances (mostly TVs but also computers, cameras and videogames), and clothing (including shoes). Females listed the following objects, in order: jewellery, stuffed animals, music, clothing and small appliances. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 107) report a similar type of finding from their study. Males tend to report *instrumental* objects more frequently, such as furniture, TVs, stereos and musical instruments, while women tend to rank highly *expressive* categories such as photographs, visual art, sculpture, books and plants. In terms of the meanings derived from their most treasured objects, according to Kamptner's data males were most likely to refer to enjoyment (mood enhancement such as 'feeling good' or 'escape'), utilitarian reasons (such as it 'gets a job done', or fulfils a role), and self (the object represents a part of one's identity); while females were most likely to list the social meanings of objects (objects that have some type of link or tie to another person) as the most important meaning, followed by self and enjoyment. In this sense, there are important gender differences: men tend to focus on objects that get things done, fulfil perceived important roles or tasks and which give direct enjoyment, entertainment or pleasure; while women tend to focus on objects that afford kin and friendship ties (for example, of memory, or direct current association).

In terms of age and object attachment, Kamptner finds that, compared to when they were young, older respondents suggested they treasure objects now for their utilitarian roles, rather than comfort or entertainment reasons. So, the kinds of objects treasured did change with age, generally from 'emotional comfort' to 'utilitarian' and 'enjoyment' roles. Kamptner suggests this change mirrors the developmental stage of adolescents, who use objects to generate autonomy and independence, generate a sense of self-identity, and engage with peers, and find excitement and stimulation. In summary, objects afford identity-related developmental opportunities for adolescents.

In her research into object meanings, Marsha L. Richins (1994a) distinguishes between the public and private meanings of possessions, while noting the interpenetration of such categories. Public meanings relate to meanings assigned by members of society at large. While there will be some variation and misinterpretation, by and large, members of a community can agree on the meaning of many objects as they are shaped by meanings around fashion, style, status and stigma. Private meanings are what a possession means for an individual. This might include some aspects of the owner's personal history, especially related to significant kin relationships. In terms of the types of possessions valued by respondents in her study, Richins found the following categories of objects, in ranked order: sentimental objects (gifts, photo albums), assets (house, property, money), transportation (car), practical objects (tools, kitchen appliances), recreational objects (sports equipment, musical instruments), personal appearance related things (hair dryer, hair straighteners, jewelry), extensions of self representing personal accomplishments (trophies, degree certificates), and aesthetic objects (paintings, sculptures). Richins' multi-stage study shows a good degree of consensus amongst her respondents regarding the intended private and public meanings of objects. To some degree this is expected: the public meanings of an object result from shared socialisation experiences, and participation in social activities. Private meanings tended to be nuanced and idiosyncratic. Thus, respondents could tell the researchers more about the private meanings they attach to objects, because an individual's direct experience with objects is shaped by the very personal nature of their life history and associations. As Richins (1994a: 517) observes: 'the range of uses and experiences provided by a vacuum cleaner, for example, is much more limited than those provided by an automobile or hiking boots'.

Some interesting research has extended the process of valuing possessions to more general personal traits, especially how materialistic a person is. Materialism refers to how strongly a person desires and values possessions as part of their identity. A materialistic person is one who highly regards the capacity of possessions in their life, and who considers possessions important ingredients for a variety of facets of their life, such as happiness, success or self-worth. Do materialistic persons value different objects, and do they ascribe them different meanings to less materialistic people? For example, while two people may equally value a car to get them from A to B (as the saying goes), a materialistic person would demand the car have various attributes which they perceived as meeting their sense of self. Likewise, a 'universal' type of clothing such as jeans could be worn by both a materialistic and less materialistic person, though the type of jeans preferred would be vastly different in price, brand and possibly design. Richins (1994b) finds that less materialistic people value objects likely to be used privately, or visible within the home only, whereas more materialistic people value objects that are worn, or used, in public spaces. Further, the more materialistic a person, the more expensive the items they highly valued. High materialism respondents were more likely to refer to financial value when describing objects, and less likely to mention interpersonal ties. Those who were low in materialism were more likely to value objects for their interpersonal meanings, rather than instrumental values. Appearance related meanings – or aesthetic values – were more highly scored by high materialists when determining their satisfaction with objects. In a unique and interesting study into the psychic world of materialistic individuals, Kasser and Kasser (2001) applied a psychoanalytic-inspired approach to survey people about the content of their dreams. By classifying people according to a materialism scale, they found that highly materialistic people were more likely to have dreams around insecurity themes (for example, like falling, or dying), conflictual interpersonal relationships with significant others, and concerns about their self-esteem. By comparison, less materialistic individuals reported dreams suggesting they strove toward greater intimacy, and felt empowered to overcome danger. Despite noted methodological limitations in their otherwise careful approach, Kasser and Kasser suggest that highly materialistic people may suffer more readily from self-doubt and threats to their identity-security, have poor interpersonal relationships, and have a self-esteem that is either low or contingent on a range of external factors.

## Conclusion

Within consumption studies, a recent shift has been toward accounts which have emphasised, even privileged, the idea of identity as central in explaining the motives and social purposes of consumption. Typically, this trend toward identity-centred approaches has been most strongly displayed within cultural studies, and more meaning-centred sociological analyses. Such moves have largely been in response to the longer history of marginalising consumption within more structural and materialist analyses. The popularity of such 'identity' approaches has been such that moves back the other way toward structural, (materially) contextualised accounts of consumption have been called for in the general tradition of Pierre Bourdieu.

The move away from identity, before adequate empirical treatment can be afforded to account for its role, is premature. This chapter has reviewed work which shows that at the very centre of people–object relations are questions of identity. This is not necessarily the 'identity' of the more colourful cultural studies and sociological accounts that suggest identity is merely something to be played or flirted with. Rather, this chapter has tried to review work that shows the centrality of people–object relations to the 'hard' identity questions of self-cultivation, psychological meaning and personality development. Objects have crucial roles to play in this psychodynamic activity of constituting and understanding self, from birth and the cradle, throughout the lifecourse.

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

On the big questions of identity, possessions and objects the first place to look is any work by Russell W. Belk. Belk is a Professor in the field of business studies who writes with analytic clarity, and an interest in cultural explanations of consumption. On self-image, consumption and attachment also see papers by Schultz et al. (1989); Dittmar and Drury (2000) and Ahuvia (2005). More generally, *The Journal of Consumer Research* has a range of consistently good qualitative and quantitative pieces on all facets of consumption. On theories of identity generally, also consult Anthony Elliott's work *Concepts of the Self* (2001) but if you like the material on object-relations discussed in this chapter also consult Elliott's useful overview of psychoanalytic theory *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction* (1994). For more on object-relations specifically, see Lavinia Gomez's *An Introduction to Object Relations* (1997), while advanced readers should browse D.W. Winnicott's important *Playing and Reality* (1971[1953]). For work on identity and sub-culture, see Paul Willis' *Profane Culture* (1978). For an updated version of British sub-culture research, see Paul Hodkinson's *Goth: Identity, Style & Subculture* (2002). Though both these works are not about material culture *per se*, look for references to how objects help to define the sub-culture's norms, experiences and values. For a design perspective that tackles questions of consumption, attachment and psychic 'lack' and stacks them up against very serious questions of waste, the biosphere and environmental degradation see Jonathan Chapman's book *Emotionally Durable Design* (2005).

# Understanding Material Culture

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