

My Possessions, Myself

Russell W. Belk



About the Author



Russell W. Belk is an authority in the field of consumer research. His work focuses on how people relate to each other through possessions. Belk received a B.S. and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. He has taught marketing at University of Exeter in England and York University in Canada.

BACKGROUND

The personal possessions described in this informative essay are not limited to the things people own as status symbols. Belk also treats items with sentimental or historical value, special relationships, and memories as possessions with great personal value.

- 1 **B**urglary victims often say that they feel they have been personally polluted. . . . Since they never had any personal contact with the burglar, what has been violated is the sense of self that exists in their jewelry, clothing, photographs, and other personal possessions.
- 2 The feeling of violation goes even deeper since the burglar has also wounded the family's sense of identity by penetrating its protective skin, the family home. Clearly, the sense of self is not only individual. Heirlooms, for example, can represent and extend a family's sense of identity, while public buildings, monuments, and parks help us develop regional and national identities. Although we Americans think of ourselves as highly individualistic, aggregate¹ identity is important to us, as the willingness to preserve and restore symbols such as the Statue of Liberty shows.

NOTES

1. **aggregate** (AG ruh giht) *adj.* gathered together into a whole; taken as one.

- 3 What we possess is, in a very real way, part of ourselves. Our thoughts and our bodies are normally the most central part of our self-concept. But next in importance are what we do—our occupations and skills—and what we have—our unique set of possessions. The fact that jewelry, weapons, and domestic utensils are found in prehistoric burial sites is evidence that we have long considered possessions as part of the person, even after death.
- 4 We find the same identification of people with possessions in examples as diverse as the reverence religions pay to relics of saints and prophets, the intensity of autograph hounds, the emphasis auctioneers place on the previous ownership of objects up for bid and the difficulty secondhand stores have in selling . . . garments worn close to the body. In each case a sense of the prior owners is thought to remain in the things that touched their lives.
- 5 We generally include four types of possessions in our personal sense of self: body and body parts, objects, places and time periods, persons and pets. Body parts are normally so well integrated into our identities that we think of them as “me” rather than merely “mine.” But several studies have shown that body parts vary widely in their importance to us.
- 6 Recently, doctoral student Mark Austin and I gave 248 adults a group of cards, each of which listed a single item in one of the four categories: body parts such as kidneys, hearts, and knees; objects such as a favorite dessert or the contents (other than money) of your wallet; places and times such as a favorite city or time of life; and particular people or pets.
- 7 We asked people to put the 96 cards in two piles, things they considered self and nonself. They then sorted each of these into two piles representing a little or a lot of self or nonself. We then gave each pile a “self” score (1, 2, 3, 4) and calculated average scores for each card. This gave us a rating of how central each item was to the sense of identity . . .
- 8 Objects were somewhat less central than body parts to the sense of self. Not surprisingly, the most important material possessions were dwellings, automobiles, and favorite clothes—each a kind of second skin that embellishes the self we present to others. Automobiles were particularly important to the identities of the men.
- 9 For both houses and cars, the more recently they had been acquired and the better their condition, the more important they were to someone’s sense of self; and the more important they were, the better care they got—dusting, painting, and remodeling in the case of houses; washing, waxing and oil changing for the cars. The similarities stopped when it came to the possession’s age. Here, older houses and newer cars were considered more important parts of the self. It may be that houses are looked on as heirlooms, for which age is a virtue, while new cars run and look better.

- 10 Other objects important to a sense of self included favorite rooms, artwork, jewelry, and clothing—all meaningful attachments to the body and the home. We found that academics were especially likely to cite books as favorite possessions, perhaps because they represent the knowledge on which their work is based. For other people, sporting goods represent what they can or could do, while the contents of wallets or purses were important because they indicated central characteristics such as age, sex, and organizational memberships, as well as personal power to spend (credit cards) and travel (driver's license).
- 11 For some, collections were a significant part of their extended selves—possessions that had been acquired through considerable personal effort. For others, heirlooms were vital parts of family self, providing a sense of the past and of continuity with prior generations.
- 12 The third category of possessions important to the extended self is the less tangible one of time and place. To most of the people in our study, and others we interviewed, childhood was an especially important time of life. They tended to cherish memories, accurate or otherwise, of this period. We found that older people were most likely to name nearby cities, states, and countries as important to their sense of self, while younger ones generally named places farther away.
- 13 Our interviews showed that people can be as acquisitive of places they visit as they are of objects they collect. We even found a sedentary form of place acquisition. An Amish² man whose religion forbids him to drive a motorized vehicle collected the hometowns of people who visited his community. While speaking to us, he reeled off a list of their states and countries much as other people mention the places they have visited personally.
- 14 There were few surprises in the final major category of possessions—people and pets—that individuals used to define themselves. The most important people were generally parents, spouses, siblings, children, and favorite friend of the same sex. Prominent political figures and favorite stars of movies and television were usually at the opposite end of the “selfness” continuum, unrelated to the sense of identity.
- 15 The common idea that some people consider their pets part of the family (and therefore of themselves) was supported by a series of interviews with people who owned dogs, cats, ferrets, birds, and various other animals. While not all owners identified strongly with their pets, some felt closer to them than to their immediate families.

2. **Amish** belonging to a Christian group whose members favor plain lives free of modern conveniences.

- 16 Is the fact that we are what we possess desirable or undesirable? There is no simple answer, but certain advantages and disadvantages seem evident. Among the advantages is that possessions provide a sense of the past. Many studies have shown that the loss of possessions that follows natural disasters or that occurs when elderly people are put in institutions is often traumatic. What people feel in these circumstances is, quite literally, a loss of self. Possessions also help children develop self-esteem, and learning to share possessions may be important in the growth of both individual and aggregate senses of self.
- 17 Incorporating possessions deeply into the sense of self can also have undesirable consequences. Too much attachment to pets can reflect an unhealthy drive to dominate and possess power and result in less devotion to family and friends. Investing too much of the self in collections and other possessions may displace love from people to things. Regarding other people as parts of our self can lead to jealousy and excessive possessiveness. Or by identifying too strongly with a spouse or child, we may end up living vicariously, instead of developing our own potential. As Erich Fromm³ asked in his book *To Have or To Be*, “If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?” ☀

3. **Erich Fromm** (1900–1980) philosopher who studied the connections between psychology and society.