

Our Stories, Ourselves: What Carrots Say About Who We Are

Introduction

Objects and the stories we tell about them usually say as much about the storyteller as about the entity itself. Personal items can be regarded as concrete reflections of what is meaningful in one's life, conveying one's values, goals and aspirations, and serving as a form of self-expression. An object's meaning is invested by its owner (Belk, 1990), and expressed through narratives told about it, which are ultimately about the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Mementos that are core to individual identity can likewise serve as bridges linking to a group identity, and helping to forge connections where social, cultural, language, economic, ethnic, age, ability, or other barriers might otherwise prevail. This poster will report on "pop-up" object-narrative sessions within two community-focused farmers' market in Toronto, Canada, and the data gathered for current SSHRC-funded research on the affordance of objects in negotiating individual and group identity.

Context

In earlier sessions held in a downtown public library branch [anonymized for submission], the stories that participants told about cherished mementos were highly personal, direct, and emotionally revealing (Author 1, Author 2, 2016 – anonymized for submission). While that pilot phase of the study suggested many avenues for further exploration, how, when, and why individual-group bonding occurs within the object-storytelling activity, warranted further study. Consequently, two separate farmers' markets as busy, open spaces were selected to explore how the object-narrative process and content might change according to locale and where there is a ready-made thematic focus, i.e., food. A second research question asked what changes in the nature and content of the storytelling might occur when personal objects were replaced with common, everyday objects – market vegetables – provided by the researchers, rather than selected by the participants, personally.

Methodology

Data collection took place at local community farmers' markets in Toronto in fall 2016. Two different locations were selected, with one market held weekly every Tuesday around noon adjacent to a major downtown hospital, and another on Saturday mornings at an outdoor community centre. Farmers' market shoppers stopped to speak with researchers, contributing a total of 21 stories across the four sessions. Participants were invited to "vote for their favourite vegetable" (in season, and normally five different kinds purchased from the market vendors), and asked to share their stories and thoughts regarding their choice(s). Some stories were shared orally, with researchers taking notes, and some were recorded in hand-written form.

Synopsis of Findings

Although the stories shared at the pop-ups were short, they were often deep and personal. The format of the pop-ups worked to promote a higher level of intensity within the stories themselves and did not appear to reflect a simple lack of "small talk". In fact, the theme of food elicited rich stories from participants, often involving memories of childhood and home. Themes of identity and relationships were among the most prominently discussed. The context of the environment

mattered and influenced the willingness of participants to share stories. Contextual factors included the weather, day of the week, and time of the market (including workday lunch-hours or more leisurely weekends), as well as the openness and approachability of the researchers in establishing level of trust needed for story-sharing.

While the format of the pop-up sessions was less personal and only involved a brief encounter and storytelling event for each participant, some of the seemingly more intimate themes (such as Relationship: Family, Identity: Childhood, Identity, and Trauma: Struggle) appeared higher in rank for the pop-up sessions than they did for the more extensive pilot sessions held in a program room at the public library. Notably, the presumably deeply personal theme of Trauma: Struggle, ranked similarly for both groups of sessions, i.e., pop-up and in a public library setting, respectively. It may be that the ability to share a story and then simply walk away helped participants to overcome shyness and inhibitions related to sharing their vulnerability with strangers.

Conclusion

If people are newcomers to a community or residence, or feel marginalized by language or circumstance, reminiscing around objects is a technique for building ‘instant rapport’ in a safe, non-judgmental, and social setting where the focus is on commonality, and not what sets us apart. Whether a show and tell in a bricks-and-mortar setting, or a spontaneous gathering to vote on a favourite vegetable, how objects may help in eliciting voice, constructing meaning, and sharing ourselves and our experiences with strangers may be beneficial to feeling more connected in an increasingly fragmented world.

Epilogue: Carrots represented the most frequently chosen vegetable of choice.

References:

Author 1 and author 2. 2016. Anonymized for submission.

Belk, R.W. 1990. The Role of Possessions in Constructing and Maintaining a Sense of Past. *Advances in Consumer Research* 17. M. Goldberg, G. Gorn, and R. Pollay, eds. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, pp. 669-676.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., and Rochberg-Halton, E. 1981. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[Word count excluding Title and References: 748 words]