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## **Objects, Memory, Identity, Voice**

**Abstract:** This paper reports findings from a two year qualitative study undertaken with aboriginal seniors in Toronto. The research assessed how a community-based collection of handcrafted objects could be used both to evoke memories of a traditional maker-culture (craft), and to foster meaning-making aligned with historical and contemporary indigenous experience.

### **Résumé:**

#### **1. Introduction**

In the early 1970s, a collection of objects hand-made by a diverse group of indigenous individuals whose names and connections with the artefacts had never been recorded, or were otherwise forgotten, were delivered into the care of an aboriginal community group in Toronto, Canada. Over thirty boxes containing beaded moccasins and vamps (the upper portion of a moccasin or boot), quill boxes, embroidered pockets, tamarack geese, wood carvings, and dolls dressed in hand

sewn traditional clothing, and more, remained, for the most part, in storage and relative obscurity until 2012 when they underwent a process of restoration and documentation

In April 2013, with funding from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Partnership Development Grant (Krpmotich, Howard, Howarth, co-PIs), faculty and graduate student researchers at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Information, entered into a collaboration with the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT) to bring a self-selected group of seniors from the NCCT into physical contact with the collection of “souvenir art” described, above. The purpose of the Memory, Meaning-making and Collections (MMMC) project was to provide collective spaces for seniors to discuss their histories, heritage, and craft-making practices and, in so doing, to build a sense of the history and heritage of urban aboriginal populations in Canada, including residential school history. This process of re-engagement was inspired by 1) the collection of hand crafted artifacts itself, 2) the interests, needs and mandate of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT) and Toronto Native Community History Project (TNCHP), and 3) research questions focused on the role of objects in enriching memory recall and in constructing,

affirming, and challenging collective memory and identities.

## **2. Background context: Aboriginal material culture collections, alienation and re-engagement**

Collections of aboriginal material culture frequently exist in museums and private collections. A combination of legal, political, economic, religious and social factors led to rampant collecting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, filling museum storerooms but often “denuding” aboriginal communities in the process (Cole 1995; King 1999; Meuli 2001). Collecting among early European explorers, missionaries and colonial officials also meant that the oldest aboriginal material heritage tended to exist in European collections, not Canadian ones. This highly structured collecting was mirrored in the activities of local historical societies and amateur archaeologists, leading to the creation of small collections meant (1) to preserve evidence of aboriginal cultural heritage, (2) to educate (and therefore “improve”) local audiences, and (3) to provide a basis for an emerging national identity (Hamilton 2010). The consequent effect was a wrapping of these collections within non-Aboriginal meanings, values and classification practices; a disengagement of Aboriginal peoples

from these collections; and the construction and legitimization of identities of both the collectors and the collected.

The NCCT collection represents a confluence of these same collecting patterns. The collecting of objects by residential school staff (nuns, nurses, educators, caretaking staff) was an extension of earlier missionary collecting, and, at the same time, an example of a local node within a network of community-building as objects were sent to a Women's Auxiliary unit in Toronto. This process of collecting on the periphery, and sending objects to the centre (Clifford 1997), mirrored earlier processes that dislocated aboriginal objects from indigenous centres and trade routes to colonial centres and museums. Some of the objects in the collection at NCCT reflected this relocation: the objects were not necessarily made or initially used within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) or even Ontario. They were connected to the Blood Reserve in Cardston, Alberta; Carcross, Yukon; Hay River, NWT; Chibougamou, Quebec; and Moose Factory, Sioux Lookout and Chapleau, Ontario.

### **3. Research Questions and Methodology**

At a basic level, the researchers were interested to learn from the interactions of participant NCCT

seniors with the objects in the collection: How did they interact with the objects? What kinds of stories did they tell? With whom did they talk about the objects? In what language(s) did they conduct these communications? In what ways did they integrate these objects into their own narratives?

Recognizing the potential of material objects in the NCCT collection to evoke or provoke memory, to foster narratives, to surface life histories, and to ground identity, the research team engaged participant seniors in small reminiscence or handling sessions with artefacts, followed up a week later by talking circles. Reminiscence therapy, as addressed in the gerontological literature, underscores the benefits to individuals of recalling and retelling autobiographical experiences to others, often within a facilitated group setting. Reminiscence therapy can happen in clinical settings, tailored to achieve specific medical or psychological outcomes, but it can also exist in the form of “simple reminiscence” (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, and Webster, 2010) characterized by structured, and facilitated social activity encouraging the telling of life stories. Purposeful sharing of memories is often triggered by the introduction of objects (personal, thematic, generic) or cultural artifacts. Underlying reminiscence therapy is an understanding that

objects and their associated narratives are a means of self-expression and assist in the maintenance of a cohesive identity (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Handling sessions evoked reminiscence by bringing individuals together in a group to view, handle, and smell self- or researcher-selected items (Arigho, 2008; Chatterjee, Noble, Vreeland, 2009; Rowlands, 2007; 2008). The objects were the starting point for conversation, for sharing memories, for personal narratives. Participants were encouraged to talk about any aspect of the object, i.e., how it was made and for what purpose(s); had participants possessed, made or used something similar; how had the object changed across time, etc. Guided reminiscence tends to focus less on the technical aspects of the object, and more on the individual's interactions with the object, the memories evoked, the narratives that take shape, both individually, and as part of a group process. Audio recordings, researcher notes, and transcripts were coded and reviewed for insights and patterns. Talking circles were typically held a week later and attended by an Elder who ensured a safe space for discussing further reflections on, or memories that may have arisen from the handling sessions. A total of six handling sessions and six talking circles were held following a ceremonial feasting of the collection

(September 14, 2013), between October 2013 and May 2014.

#### **4. Findings and Summary**

As was anticipated, handling sessions and talking circles with participant seniors confirmed the inherent capability of objects to evoke memory, to elicit personal narratives, and to encourage individual and group storytelling. Sessions also reinforced the power of reminiscence to foster opportunities for social engagement and to enhance an individual's sense of self-efficacy and self-worth (Bluck and Levine, 1998; Hendry and Howarth, 2013); Westerhof, Bohlmeijer and Webster, 2010).

In addition, work with participant seniors over the past year and a half has revealed individuals with a keen interest in tactile and other sensory engagement with the artifacts, a deep curiosity for historical roots, and a willingness to share rich stories based on the memories the objects have evoked. The conference presentation will focus on the insights shared by the 12-15 participant seniors who attended the groups regularly, particularly as they relate to making sense of craft, community, agency, and indigenous identity across time.

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