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Objects, Identity, Storytelling, and Finding Common Ground

Abstract: Outcomes are reported from a pilot study exploring the role of objects, as representative of the self, in negotiating individual identity within a group context. Understanding how objects may serve to bring us both out of ourselves and also together may prove key to fostering community resilience.

Résumé:

1. Introduction, Context, and Theoretical Framing for the Research

Objects and their associated narratives are a means of self-expression and can be instrumental in supporting a cohesive yet dynamic expression of self over time. The practice of common reminiscence or sharing personal stories within a group setting, underscores the continuous validation of self-identity, and the expression of

"self" to others. Objects may be a part of such sessions, serving as a means of building connection, fostering greater understanding, and remaining engaged socially (Jacques 2007; Rowlands 2008). Storytelling around cherished objects can provide often socially-isolated participants with a common and "neutral" space for engaging in conversation and rich interaction with others (Howarth 2014). Objects 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.

Personal objects can be used to reflect what is meaningful in one's life, conveying one's values, goals and aspirations, and serving as a form of self-expression (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). An individual invests meaning in his or her memento (Belk 1990), telling stories about it which are, ultimately, narratives about the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981).

In addition, objects, their associated narratives, and "meanings" have properties and elements that allow them to be categorized in terms of affinities (similarities) and distinctions (differences), though perhaps not in the same way by any two people. For example, the same spoon might be viewed as a

tool, or as an heirloom depending on one's perspective (Howarth, Bayo Urban, Vamanu & Ghaddar 2014). Objects can be seen to play a role in how individuals "integrate" or "differentiate" themselves from others in society (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981).

Individual stories or self-narratives (used interchangeably by Baumeister & Newman 1994), can be viewed as exercises in self-interpretation, by which people find meaning and make sense of their experiences. Bruner (2004) suggests, further, that a "self-told life" should be interpreted, "not as a record of what happened (which is in any case a nonexistent record) but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience" wherein, "we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (Bruner 2004, 691-92; 694).

But while personal meaning may derive from "an interpretive feat" (Bruner 2004, 693), Bruner also notes that, "life stories must mesh, so to speak, within a community of life stories; tellers and listeners must share some 'deep structure' about the nature of a 'life,' for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing." Within this latter quote one sees the link

between personal and communal narrative (life-storytelling), and the importance of negotiated meaning as one situates expressions of self-identity within the context of group-identity (community). Goffman's (1959) concept of "the presentation of self," likewise posits that individuals attempt to maintain a cohesive self and adapt their narratives and behaviour depending on audience and context.

2. Research Purpose, Questions, and Methodology

While the body of literature reviewed in the preceding section addresses the **role of objects** relative to (1) **individual** self-narrative and the expression of identity, and (2) **group** narrative and the expression of communal identity, respectively, the link **between** individual and group narrative and identity as afforded by objects does not appear to have been made, either explicitly, or as a locus of formal study. Consequently, this paper will report on outcomes from a pilot study conducted as prelude to multi-phase research exploring the role of objects in negotiating individual identity – as expressed through the object as representative of the self – within a group context, where the articulation of a common identity is mandated by a coordinated, communal assembly or collaborative curation of objects and stories.

At this initial stage of the exploratory, qualitative study, *Show, Tell, Bridge,* we are focusing on the following research questions:

1. In what ways do individuals use personal objects to represent themselves – their self-identity – to others?
2. What affordances do personal objects offer to the process of negotiating community identity from a baseline of diverse representations of individual selves? What is the role of personal objects in calibrating what is meaningful to the individual with what is determined as important to a group?

Answering these questions will help us to examine whether the application of the object-narrative approach can ultimately foster connections within a group context, as well as facilitate connections among individuals who might otherwise be isolated or marginalized.

The processes by which affinities are established among individuals, and identities negotiated to accommodate group norms is being examined through individual and group storytelling around select and self-selected objects. In the initial pilot phase of the study, participants were invited to bring cherished personal objects, or mementos, to a library storytelling group, and welcomed to share

a story with others. Participants were adults drawn from existing library programs and the surrounding neighbourhood, recruited largely through flyers and word-of-mouth. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed each week across a five-week period. Initial findings from the pilot study are being used to refine subsequent iterations of the multi-phase research and offer some key lessons for subsequent development of an object-storytelling programming guide for use in settings where there may be an interest in fostering community among diverse individuals.

3. Initial Findings from the Pilot Study

The stories that participants told were highly personal, direct, and emotionally revealing. The object was not only the focus of the narrative, but also the locus of the depth and range of meaning ascribed by each individual. Though the objects were central to the first telling of participants' stories - serving as catalysts for self-presentation and discussion - they quickly receded into the background during subsequent sessions of the program. Stories became "flatter" after the first telling – perhaps suggesting that it may be the first telling of an object's story that says something about us. By the second telling, we may dispense with using the memento to self-reveal, moving on to expand on the initial story, or spinning off to

other stories, or to adding our own perspectives to the stories of others, etc.

Unexpectedly, the age and gender composition of the group also emerged as key elements of the dynamic of the pilot study. Although it was initially proposed that the project focus on older adults, over half of the pilot program's participants were younger, including parents of young children, and graduate students. It should also be noted that, though recruitment criteria were quite open, only women attended the first program sessions, with the final session welcoming the sole male participant. Likewise, while native English speakers formed the nucleus of participants ($n = 6$) across the first three sessions, native speakers of Mandarin ($n = 4$) joined the last two sessions, expressing a particular interest in listening to and telling stories as a "way of practicing English". As the multi-phase study proceeds, we anticipate that individual group dynamics will vary depending on such factors as age and life stage, gender, cultural background, language, and motivation for participation.

While further analysis of pilot study data are required and may yield additional outcomes, some interpretation of preliminary findings can be offered. First, commonality is not a given, and connections are not predictable. Among the pilot

participants, and perhaps contrary to what we might have anticipated, connections were not necessarily cemented around similar ages or stages in life, around children, around language, or around experiences-in-common, such as travel or dislocation, loss, accomplishment, cultural affinity, collocation (place of birth or residence). Rather, bonds appeared to form more readily based on a kind of affinity, even an empathy with the individual and her or his story. Further, no one individual's story was sensed to be any more or less important than another. Each participant listened respectfully to the other's story around her or his object. There was no interrupting, and both questions and conversation resulting from each story were minimal (sometimes none) until the storyteller had quite obviously finished what she or he wanted to say. While the almost instant aligning with the storyteller may vary across groups as the study proceeds, the pilot suggested that the "glue" necessary to finding commonality may rest less on sharing an affinity with the actual experience ("I have been to Paris, too") of another, and more on relating to the meaning of that experience – an empathic connection – that the storyteller shares in presenting her or his memento. How, when, and why individual-group bonding occurs within the object-storytelling activity, warrants further study, and will be a critical piece to the **Show, Tell, Bridge** research as we proceed.

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