

Why they collect: collectors reveal their motivations

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This paper reviews traditional psychoanalytic ideas on the motivations of collectors as well as newer 'relational-model' psychoanalytic approaches focusing on the development and stability of the self. Descriptive data on motivations are presented, based on 112 collectors' responses to a questionnaire and 55 letters from collectors. Categorization of motivations was based on the meanings of collecting (1) to the self; (2) to others; (3) as preservation, restoration, history, and a sense of continuity; (4) as financial investment and (5) as addiction. Suggestions for future research include the use of in-depth interviews with collectors over a period of years in efforts to further explore motivations as well as changes in collecting patterns over time.

Collecting is an important part of some people's lives as attested by the many magazines on collecting and by fairs inviting collectors' participation. Despite its importance, most examinations of collecting have appeared in the popular press and relatively few scholarly papers have been published. The first part of this paper surveys a portion of this scholarly work, focusing on psychoanalytic theories of the motivations of collectors. The second part offers preliminary data from an empirical study of collectors who were asked to speculate on the motivation to collect.

We shall first refer to Freud and his followers, who derived the individual's relationship to possessions and to collecting from the sexual drive. We shall then discuss notions about possessions and collecting from one of the newer 'relational-model' theories.

EARLY PSYCHOANALYTIC THOUGHT

Early contributions to the motivation to collect derive from Freud's biological drive model (1963), and were elaborated on by Jones (1950), Abraham (1927) and Fenichel (1945). These writers asserted a continuity between infant experience and adult personality traits. During one of the 'psychosexual stages', the 'anal' stage, when infants' libidinal pleasures are related to sphincter control, a connection was asserted to exist between these anal-erotic impulses and certain traits of adults. This connection was twofold: (1) between faeces, the first product 'created' and overvalued by the infant, and the overestimation of things symbolic of faeces in adult life, and (2) certain traits originating during toilet training and its attendant struggle with parental authority and the adult personality traits of obstinacy, orderliness and parsimony.

Jones (1912) described

the refusal to give and the desire to gather...collect, and hoard. All collectors are anal-erotics, and the objects collected are nearly always typical copro-symbols: thus, money, coins (apart from current ones), stamps, eggs, butterflies,...books, and even worthless things like pins, old newspapers, etc.... A more edifying manifestation of the same complex is the great affection that may be displayed for various symbolic objects. Not to speak of the fond care that may be lavished on a given collection—a trait of obvious value in the custodians of museums and libraries.

(1912:430)

Abraham (1927) further suggested a similarity between collecting, or the love of possessions, and the love of a human being: the

excessive value he (the collector) places on the object he collects corresponds completely to the lover's overestimate of his sexual object. A passion for collecting is frequently a direct surrogate for a sexual desire...a bachelor's keenness for collecting often diminishes after he has married.

(1927:67)

According to Fenichel (1945), childhood attitudes towards success or failure during toilet training are often continuous with later attitudes towards personal achievements. Such attitudes vary between self satisfaction and discontent, or vacillate between the two. Anal conflicts include two components—fear of loss and enjoyment of an erogenous pleasure. These conflicts may be displaced onto collecting. For example:

A patient with the hobby of excerpting everything he read and arranging the excerpts in different files enjoyed in so doing (a) an anal-erotic pleasure: what he read represented food; his files represented the feces, into which the food had been turned by him; he liked to look at his feces and to admire his 'productivity'; (b) reassurance: the filing system was supposed to prove that he had things 'under control',

(1945:383)

again an allusion to toilet training.

Lerner (1961) appears to have been the only investigator who searched for an empirical basis for the presence of anal conflicts and their sublimation in collecting. He contrasted an experimental group of 15 stamp-collectors with a control group of 15 non-collectors. A list of 22 'anally-connotative' words was constructed and matched with neutral words. He determined auditory and visual thresholds of perception for each word. Data were analysed for differences within each subject and between groups of subjects, with regard to perceptual thresholds for anal and for neutral words. Lerner hypothesized that some subjects would show 'defence' effects, i.e., would respond more slowly, while others would show 'vigilance' effects, and would respond more rapidly when shown 'anally-connotative' words. Evidence in support of the hypothesis that collectors would differ in their perception of anal and neutral words was found, and Lerner believed that his study offered experimental evidence for the validity of the anal-character concept, as well as for the concept of sublimation.

Another motivation underlying collecting derives from psychoanalytic drive theory (Loewenstein, personal communication, 1988). Freud had hypothesized the existence of two drives, libido and aggression. Collecting might be viewed as deriving not from libido, i.e., the anal-erotic impulse, but from the aggressive drive. In many respects collecting resembles hunting: one locates the prey, plans for the attack, acquires the prey in the presence of real or

imagined competition for it, and feels elated. The prey becomes a trophy—a symbol of one's aggression and prowess.

NEWER PSYCHOANALYTIC THOUGHT

During the last twenty post-Freudian years, 'relational-model' theories have begun to dominate psychoanalytic thinking. While the theories differ from one another, according to Mitchell's (1988) account, they draw on a vision of human development different from Freud's. Human beings are portrayed in them not as driven by sexual and/or aggressive impulses, but as shaped and embedded, and understood only within a matrix of relationships with other people. The mind is viewed as dyadic and interactive, seeking contact and engagement with other minds. Psychic organization and structures are based on patterns which have accompanied early interactions with caretakers.

Self Psychology, one of the relational-model theories, contributes to our understanding of the motivations of collectors. This theory concerns itself with the development of a healthy, cohesive, stable sense of self. According to Kohut (1984), the self develops dyadically out of close early relationships called 'selfobject relationships'. Self Psychology does not reduce all human experience and motivation to two inborn drives, as Freud had proposed. Thus sexuality is no longer the central motivator of behaviour. In fact, Self Psychologists view an overconcern with sexuality as an indication that the individual has perceived a threat to his/her stability and now attempts to fortify it. Thus, heightened sexual concerns and behaviour are viewed negatively, as desperate attempts at shoring up a fragile sense of self. This dethroning of sexuality also means that collecting is no longer viewed as a sublimation of anal sexuality, or as evidence of the trait of parsimony. Rather, collecting represents a need of the individual to explore, be in contact with others, and search for personal stability.

Wolf (1980) has attempted to chart the development of the self over the lifespan. In infancy, a close relationship to a primary caretaker permits the development of self structures, the creation of 'selfobjects'. With increasing maturation, other family members, friends or peers may substitute for the earlier relationship. Eventually, in adulthood, the need for a close relationship to another human being may also be transferred onto abstractions—to one's country, one's language, religion, profession. And to one's collecting. The motivation to collect may thus be viewed as partly arising out of the impulse to explore and seek contact with others, as well as representing a later development of early needs for close relationships with others.

William James (1892) and others (Beaglehole 1974; Furby 1978; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) have also asserted a close connection between personality and relationship to property. James, in particular, discussed the concept of the self, and applied it to collecting. Possessions, to him, are extensions of the self:

A man's Self is the sum-total of all that he can call his, not only his body, and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his land and horse and yacht and bank account.

(James 1892:177)

Moreover, if acquiring things aids our maintaining the continuity and cohesiveness of the self, their loss is bound to have adverse effects. According to James, people feel 'personally annihilated if a life-long construction of their hands or brains—say an entomological collection or an extensive work in manuscript—were suddenly swept away'.

A loss of possessions leads to 'shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness' (p. 178).

James seems to allude to a connection between a loss of possessions and depressed feelings. He is echoed by Freud's observations of his own collecting: 'on the next rainy day I shall walk down to my beloved Salzburg; the last time I was there I picked up a few old Egyptian things. Those things cheer me and remind me of distant times and countries' (1954:291). And William Randolph Hearst's mother allegedly remarked that 'every time Willie feels badly, he goes out and buys something' (Saarinen 1958:76).

EMPIRICAL WORK

Empirical research on collecting has been summarized by Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, Holbrook and Roberts (1988) and Olmsted (1991). While both summaries refer to motivations, no researchers have addressed motivations. And with good reason! Representative samples are probably unobtainable. Questionnaires are inadequate in view of the complexity of the issue. And, as many collectors are familiar with popular writings on collecting, their own ideas of collecting are no doubt influenced by what they've read. In view of this familiarity, the collectors' own speculations about their collecting cannot be used to validate hypotheses. Despite these difficulties, we decided to construct a questionnaire and search for collectors to respond to it. What follows is a preliminary and descriptive report of the responses to this questionnaire, as well as excerpts from collectors' letters.

METHOD

Subjects

Our sample includes responses from 167 subjects: out of 300 questionnaires sent to professors at Hofstra University (Long Island, New York) for class distribution, 32 responses were received from students, 12 from professors, and 7 from members of students' or professors' families; 32 collectors and 7 dealers who responded to our 'author's query' in the *New York Times*, or to notices in *The Antique Trader*, *Clocks Magazine* and other specialized collectors' publications, and who subsequently filled out questionnaires, and 5 collectors taking a course on collecting at another university. Seventeen respondents were recruited through personal contacts. Fifty-five letters were received from collectors and/or dealers who responded to the notices in the above-mentioned publications but who did not fill out questionnaires. This procedure of finding subjects is of course highly selective and permits no more than a glimpse into the personalities and the behaviour of some highly verbal collectors. It underrepresents those who do not attend private universities or read the *New York Times* and magazines for collectors. It also excludes those whose concern for their valuable collections led some to contact the author but who refused to fill out questionnaires, even when anonymity was promised.

Some demographic information is presently available on the first 97 questionnaires. Fifty-five respondents were female, 40 were male, and no information is available on two. Three respondents were between the ages of 9 and 16; 7 between 17 and 24; 25 between 25 and 39; 30 between 40 and 54, and 32 were over 55.

Nine people had been collecting between 1 and 4 years; 26 between 5 and 10 years; 12 between 11 and 15 years, and 46 longer than 16 years. No information is available on 4.

Sixty-two collectors stated that they researched their collected items in books and/or magazines, and one researched in a museum. Information is missing on the other respondents.

Instrument

The questionnaire further asked about how collectors added items to their collections (e.g., find, trade, auctions, gifts, buy); how their collections are displayed; whether items are researched (e.g., in books, magazines, journals, museums); how much money is spent annually on the collection; what got collectors started on collecting, and how many different collections they had.

In addition to these factual questions, the questionnaire also addressed more intimate aspects of collecting, such as: When you acquire a new item, what do you feel? When you show your collection to others, does it matter to you that they react as you do, or admire your collection and your work as the collector? When do you work on your collection? When do you feel you want to add items to it? (e.g., when your life feels busy and full? when you're feeling a bit down? when you have lots of time?) Do you worry that your impulse to collect may get out of control and that you will spend too much money? Do you give any thought to the disposition of your collection?

We were most interested in the questions on motivation: Why do you think people collect? What motivates them? Why do you collect? Do you think collectors as a group differ from non-collectors? How important is your collection to you? Are there similarities in the personalities of collectors of similar items?

RESULTS

Out of the total of 112 questionnaires, 90 responded to the question on motivation. Some of the letter-writers also commented on motivation and are identified below by 'L' before their number. Of the 90, 3 (who identified themselves as psychologists!) did not respond, and 19 wrote that people collected for 'fun', 'interest', 'because it's a hobby', thus not really answering in any detail.

Multiple motivations

Twelve respondents listed multiple motivations. For example, No. 32, who collects prints, photographs, drawings, oils, wine, netsukes, books and other things: 'The challenge of the hunt; increasing and refining one's knowledge; patronage of an artist; having beautiful objects that retain or increase their value.' She adds, 'I think I enjoy objects more than people.' No. 48, a collector of military flags and flag items: 'Some collectors are in it for the hunt, others are hoarders, and some are preservationists or artefact conservators.' He collects for the 'experience of the past through historical objects that were used in struggles, and to appreciate lost values and workmanship.' No. 66, a pottery collector: 'Esthetic or historical satisfaction; excitement of the hunt and actual acquisition. Having something no one else has. Potential for financial appreciation.' No. 19, a collector of antique drinking-vessels: 'To have something that will "live" after them; to build ego: I have something you don't; to complete sets; to accumulate wealth; to satisfy yearnings for the good old days.' He adds that he has found good friends via his hobby, and that some of these friends have become more important to him than the hobby itself.

Collecting has meanings in relation to the self

Thirty responses were classified as pertaining in one way or another to the self—a motivation described by William James (1892) and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), referred to by Belk *et al.* (1988), and extrapolated from the work of the relational-model theorists. We have tried to divide this group into (a) those who collect as a defence against feeling low, (b) those for whom collecting appears to be a challenge, a wish for expertise, knowledge or mastery, and (c) those for whom collecting has a narcissistic function, that is, is essential for the maintenance of their self esteem.

(a) One would expect some collectors to refer to their being motivated by a need to counteract a sense of loss, low spirits or depressed states, and by a need for elation. Yet only one collector (No. 27) expressed such a motivation: ‘I can focus my entire attention on searching out blue glass and can release my mind from other concerns. My collecting intensified after my mother died.’

(b) No. 90, an antiques collector: ‘Collecting serves as an extension of the collector and his creativity; and brings a sense of excitement and purpose to one’s life.’ No. 87 collects seashells: ‘People have a primal urge to collect, probably a connection to an early childhood pleasurable experience or a sense of order and control about possessing something.’

(c) The term ‘narcissism’ refers to the search for the maintenance of self-esteem. Mental activity is narcissistic to the degree that it functions to maintain the self as cohesive, stable and with positive affect (Stolorow and Lachmann 1980). This activity is frequently directed towards others—human beings and things—that become the source of supply for self-esteem. It is characteristic of some narcissists that the supplies only temporarily aid in maintaining their self-esteem, and that new sources of supplies must be found. ‘I’m thrilled when I buy a new item’, wrote antiques collector, No. 101. ‘It gets special attention from me for a while. I show it to my friends before it goes in with the others. Then I slowly lose interest and look for new items.’ And No. 56: ‘I enjoy having something that others don’t have.’

No. 69, a doll-collector: ‘Some people want to have something special of their own and have a compulsion for perfection.’

Collecting has meanings in relation to other people

Eight respondents referred to the relationship between collecting and love of people—a motivation also consistent with relational-model theories. The items collected may represent close relationships to others, and the sharing and communicating with a group of like-minded people contributes to the individual’s sense of well-being. For example, No. 42, who collects antique automobiles, spoke of the ‘world of friendship that is opened to other collectors around the world’. No. 72, a collector of dolls, coins and musical boxes: ‘People are motivated by sharing with others a segment of their personality.’ No. 75, who collects books, records and shrubs: ‘Some collect because their collections are their friends, and for some sharing with others has great value.’ The relationship to people may also further status ambitions, as suggested by No. 112, who collects figurines: ‘The desire to belong and become a part of an acceptable group of people.’ Or, from L54: ‘A new item becomes part of my collection and part of my family, or a close friend.’

Collecting as preservation, restoration, history and a sense of continuity

The need to restore and preserve was mentioned by four collectors. No. 27, who collects antique phonographs: 'The passion to preserve items for other people to enjoy. Getting an item back to pristine condition and working.' No. 40, a rock-collector: 'God created the world either by some unfolding principle or by a Big Bang. Rocks are part of this. It should make us realize that there is a great wondrous God. I am only a laborer and not very intelligent.... People collect to protect and preserve.' No. 57 collects old linens and lace: 'I collect for the love of old things. I like to see them saved for the future and when there will be none around.'

One of the six collectors who mentioned history as a motivation, No. 59, collects clocks and watches. He is motivated by the 'intrigue and history of time pieces'. No. 89, who collects fibre-related antiques, mercury glass, standard poodle miniatures, and snow eagles: 'For history buffs, it's a way of touching the past.' No. L23, who collects political buttons: 'I see collecting presidential memorabilia as a real service to our country.' No. L60, who collects postcards, pictures of royal families, letters from celebrities, all cut from newspapers, said that her scrapbooks 'make the past live again. These treasures hold everything there for you at a moment's notice...and it's special because you chose to cut it out and save it.... They all offer solace—a quiet world—you own what you've cut out, planned and ordered. I have pictures of movie stars that I cut out at age six—these pictures represent me.'

Collecting as financial investment

Eight collectors mentioned primarily financial motivations, but those who listed multiple motivations included them as well.

Collecting as an addiction

An important motivation is the feeling of excitement and elation. Referred to but as yet unexplored in the literature, is the collector's 'addiction' to collecting (Belk *et al.* 1988). The terms 'obsession' or 'compulsion' are mentioned chiefly in the popular literature (Olmsted 1991) and are not distinguished from addiction. Nine respondents mentioned addiction, obsession and compulsion, but definitions and introspective data are missing. Only one collector reported on his state of mind:

I looked forward for weeks to the day of this annual book sale and felt like a child waiting for Christmas. That date seems to organize my life; not only did I have to arrange to be on time, but I had to be there at least one hour before the opening in order to secure one of the first places in line. Once on line, I could feel a sense of arousal and excitement (release of endorphins?), heightened by overhearing conversations expressing similar excitement. Some of the talk is of treasures found at other book sales. Strategies are considered—which section to attend to first. The doors finally open. The crowd surges in. Chaos reigns until the collectors disperse to their areas of interest where they begin to place books into bags or boxes from which they will make their final selections. Elation continues during the hard work of scanning books as either fit for my collection, unfit or doubtful and to be decided on later. The next anticipated pleasure is to examine my purchases at home. Yet, with a few exceptions, after some time has elapsed, I can't exactly tell which book was bought where. Moreover, I sometimes wonder what made me buy a particular book. But I look forward to my next fix: another book sale, auction, or visit to a book dealer.

Miscellaneous motivations

There is a considerable popular and anecdotal literature on unusual and/or pathological collecting (see Carmichael 1971). In our sample an unusual motivation was expressed by No. L13. He felt 'a real compulsion to collect, but just for the sake of doing so, without any real interest'. He collected newspapers, stored them in his garage, and soon accumulated high stacks. He was unemployed. When his mother urged him to get a job, he felt compelled first to read all the accumulated newspapers since he thought he might miss something going on in the world. A slow reader, he remained unemployed for years.

No. L73 collects music: 'I try to learn more about a particular piece of music because I am intimidated by the intellectual jargon of the Arts Establishment. So I contrived my own approach to an understanding of the works without having to cope with scholarly disciplines beyond my reach.' He collected live performances, on tape, of over 1,000 pieces predetermined by his idiosyncratic taste. One might interpret his collecting as motivated by anti-establishment attitudes which lend him a sense of adequacy.

Our questionnaire further asked collectors about their views of the differences among collectors: Are there similarities in the personalities of collectors of similar items? Would you expect coin-collectors as a group to differ from book- or car-collectors? In what ways? Neither this question nor a question pertaining to differences between collectors and non-collectors yielded much information. Baekeland (1981) has suggested differences among collectors as based on a possible linkage of introversion and extraversion to aesthetic preferences, or of conservatism as leading to a dislike of abstract and complex art works, or the possibility that the three basic body types (mesomorph, endomorph and ectomorph) determine a preference for paintings. People tend to prefer those paintings that symbolize their somatotypes. This is another issue in need of research.

DISCUSSION

We have categorized our collectors' statements under five rubrics in addition to a category of collectors offering multiple motivations: collecting has meanings (1) in relation to the self, (2) in relation to other people, (3) as preservation, restoration, history and a sense of continuity, (4) as financial investment and (5) as addiction. While the categories are empirically derived, some reflect the emphasis of 'relational-model' psychoanalytic theories.

As expected, evidence for the existence of sublimated anal-erotic impulses in collecting was not found. Such evidence has traditionally derived from the couch rather than from the laboratory, from interpretation rather than from direct observation. Lerner's perceptual study is the only exception. And even his carefully designed research rests on the interpretation of the speed of responses in line with psychoanalytic drive theory.

Our research was designed to explore rather than to test hypotheses. We believe that our collectors' insightful responses have added to our understanding of the myriad of motivations to collect and will stimulate further research.

In view of the diversity of motivations found, one may speculate on the function of collecting to the individual personality. What seemed to be characteristic of our collectors, but less so of the literature surveyed, and what further complicated any efforts to reconcile our data with existing speculations on the collector's motivation, were references to changes in collecting interests and behaviour over time. While the literature suggests a linearity in regard to factors determining collecting and influencing the collector, our data suggest that collectors have experienced and observed changes within themselves. Collecting may be in the service of whatever

motivations or needs dominate the individual at any given time, and may satisfy different personality needs at different times. This view also leads away from the search for one or more 'basic' motivations, and permits one to understand changes in an individual's collecting behaviour over time. It further suggests that questionnaire approaches are inadequate to the study of motivations and should be followed up by introspective reports, longitudinally, and by in-depth interviews to determine changes in collecting as reflective of changes in the collector's life and personality.

What is common to all motivations to collect, and what appears to be the collector's defining characteristic, is a passion for the particular things collected. This passion which, in some, resembles sexual excitement, may have led Jones, Abraham and Fenichel to consider collecting as the sublimation of anal-erotic impulses. In our sample, collectors alluded to their passion but could not fully describe it nor give evidence of understanding it. The adolescent Gustave Flaubert (1954) could describe it in a story about a book collector: 'he took the cherished book, devoured it with his eyes,...and loved it as a miser does his treasure, a father his daughter, a king his crown' (p. 10).

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