This chapter invites readers to view the relation between persons and possessions in a life course framework that has many options for research. The chapter addresses the management of possessions in later life, the reasons for keeping and disposing, and the labour that things entail. Finally, material objects are long-lasting but human lives are limited, and so the fate of belongings becomes not only a personal question but a social concern.

Possessions are material things that reside with people and stay long enough to merit some care, even if only to be placed somewhere for later consideration. Possessions may be single items, a group of things (as a collection), or an assemblage of things (my kitchen). In the same way that Kahn and Antonucci (1980) originally applied the convoy metaphor to describe a structure of social support, so the body of one’s possessions, at any one time and as borne through time, can be called a ‘convoy of material support’. Analogous to the social convoy, the material convoy is a dynamic composition of enduring and transient items, having developmental features, members with more or less importance, and convoy constituents that also occupy the convoys of others. People develop emotional and affirmative relations with their things and, like social convoys, maintain this resource for its actual as well as potential supportiveness.

Possessions furnish life course careers as workers, partners, parents, property owners, and cultural participants. People understand their place and progress in the life course in relation to goods, using them to fulfil age-related norms, expectations, and roles. Changing bodies are groomed by self-care modalities and mediated by clothing. Living areas and properties are stocked and re-stocked if the household expands to include partners and children who entrain their own material convoys over time. Successive employment situations require specialized clothing, equipment, and means of transportation. Away from work, possessions provision leisure time with entertainment, recreation, and self-development. Things received as gifts, often given to mark the passage of time or significant life events, add to the convoy even as they create future ties to others. Residential stability and maturity may also position one to accept custody and responsibility for heirlooms and ‘family things’.

Possessions have communicative value for telling stories about oneself. They are a way to evaluate in oneself and others how well life is going, and where it might go next. Just as possessions can signal conformity to age expectations and scripts, they can also be deployed for
rebellion and resistance to age. Thus, an ongoing career of consumption actualizes and expresses the life course.

Three additional dimensions attend the material convoy in later life (Smith and Ekerdt 2011). First, some belongings have endured for a long time, making them biographically meaningful and even more prone to be kept. Second, with advancing age, the manageable and future disposition of things come into question. Third and following from this, the social convoy of family and friends takes an increasing interest in the safety and security of elders, and this concern can extend to their property.

There are great opportunities in studying the composition, size, and arc of the material convoy. Taking this up, researchers have decisions to make about approach and analytic foci. To begin, should one adopt or forego a moralizing critique of contemporary consumer culture (Sassatelli 2007)? It is indeed tempting to level the charge of overconsumption at households that are brimming with belongings. There is an entire genre of self-help materials urging adults to discipline and self-mastery through clutter control (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003), and the taming imperative, sometimes paternalistic in tone, extends even to later life (Smith and Ekerdt 2011).

Research can follow things or follow people. The latter route seems most obvious, disclosing and analyzing people’s motives, emotions, and practices in regard to possessions and how these relations illuminate human development and ageing. But one can also follow things, which is a proud tradition in anthropology (Appadurai 1986) and is now encouraged by the ‘material turn’ in sociology (Munro 2012). This route invites the exploration of the ethical, environmental, and practical implications of life course consumption and disposal (Hetherington 2004). The circulation of things among family members, especially intergenerational transfers, is a potentially fruitful way to appreciate kinship and solidarity (Stum 2000).

The possession-unit of analysis is another important decision, whether to focus on particular items or the totality. With a focus on the particular, one might select a single category of possession to investigate, such as books, gardens, or clothing. The home can be regarded as a single possession because it is a unique configuration of multiple items arranged to support daily life. A common method for possession studies among older adults is the ‘cherished possession’ technique. Investigators invite people to identify and discuss the provenance and meaning of their most cherished, special, or important things. This is a productive gambit that yields much narrative about the things and their possessors (for example Marx, Solomon and Miller 2004, Morris 1992, Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000). However, having asked about special things, studies of this kind reap content about the specialness of things, and this has created a dominant emphasis on the symbolic properties of belongings for older adults.

To study the convoy as a whole or totality, one confronts the thousands of things that anyone might possess, not only indoors but perhaps in other buildings on the property, in storage, in autos, and at work. Some of these belongings are familiar and can be readily brought to mind, but some have slipped from awareness. Some are merely tolerated, and some are resented, much as people can feel ambivalently about members of their social convoy. Large portions of the entire lot can congeal into the sheer materiality of being ‘stuff’. The main reports about whole-house possession management have come from qualitative studies of household downsizing for residential moves (Ekerdt et al. 2004, Marcoux 2001, Perry 2012). The possessions in any one place are hard to count or quantify, as research efforts have shown (Arnold et al. 2012, Gosling et al. 2005). The field lacks survey and interview techniques that could answer basic questions about the expansion and contraction of the material convoy over the life course; about age-related changes in possession attachment; about the burden of possessions; and about cohort differences in possession attachment and practices.
Another point of research design is the person-unit of analysis. Some items are rather personal and only their owners could be informative about them. Some items are joint property with spouses, and so can be investigated from both points of view. For selected other items, there is de facto shared possession with family and kin (for example, photos and heirlooms). Because the meaning of these things is a co-construction and their disposition is not an individual prerogative, multiple perspectives on the same thing are fitting. Finally, research on possessions need not be confined to the possessors. Entire professions have arisen to assist the circulation and disbursement of the material convoy. Expertise about people’s things and their management can be found among auctioneers, estate sellers, donation agencies, move-in coordinators at retirement communities, moving companies, and self-storage operators.

Keeping and disposing

People acquire things by buying, finding, or creating them, or receiving them as gifts. People come to have things by quasi-possession, adopting family heirlooms or archiving the things of others. Consumption studies pay most attention to buying, but keeping and disposing are likewise integral for understanding material culture (Gregson 2007, Miller 2008). As noted earlier, possessions are objects that stay long enough to merit some care. There is an agency to keeping. What is not used up or quickly disposed must be placed, stored, arranged, contained, maintained, and cleaned. Some belongings are emotionally invested and even attributed with an inner life toward which one must act with respect. Possessing, which is based in the Latin word ‘to sit’, is variously called accommodation, cultivation, appropriation, endowment, singularisation, or decommoditisation—essentially making the thing over as ‘mine’ (Dant 1999, Kleine and Baker 2004, McCracken 1988).

Once objects have come into possession, why are they kept? Reasons for acquiring can endure as reasons for keeping, and both motives have been explored in research on the meaning of things. People value things for two generic reasons: instrumental control of one’s environment, and symbolization of self and others (Belk 1988, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Furby 1978, Richins 1994). The instrumental and symbolic motives for possession can, in turn, be elaborated into more categories of meaning (e.g., Kamptner 1989, Rubinstein 1987). Older adults in a study by Ekerdt and colleagues (2004) reported that people kept things because they are useful, are worth money, give pleasure, represent oneself, or conjure the future. And they kept things out of reciprocity to gift givers, out of responsibility to forebears, because conservation is a virtue, or simply because they could, given the space in their dwellings.

Ultimately, possession research circles back to the idea that possessions are an important means for expressing self or identity (Dittmar 1992). ‘A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as parts of ourselves’ (Belk 1988: 139). Sartre (1956) offered the ontological insight that ‘I am what I have’ to argue that having is a way of being in the world. If possessions are extensions of the self, then the passage of time potentially alters things and self and their relations.

The difficulty with designating the meaning of things is that any one thing can have multiple meanings and those meanings can shift over time. A piece of jewellery, for example, can be useful and stylish and a memento of a foreign trip—and all at once. Possession motives may fade, only to be replaced by others. The jewellery is now out of fashion, unwearable, but still ‘worth a lot of money’. Transmissions of things, particularly as attempted gifts or during sales, test their value. When the personal worth of things is not borne out (gifts refused, prices not met), the failure can be painful (Marcoux 2001, Marx et al. 2004). Research attests to the significance and meaningfulness of selected possessions (e.g. Kroger and Adair 2008, Price et al. 2000), but the potential...
fluidity of meaning for the many constituents in the material convoy should counsel some caution in generalizing why older people have and keep things. A lot of things can mean a lot of things.

Intentional keeping is one reason for accumulation, but neglect is another as things get placed in ‘backstage’ areas of the dwelling. This may occur in the interest of keeping a tidy house; as a solution to the difficulties of disposal; because there has been replacement consumption without disposal; or just because the dwelling can contain it all (Arnold et al. 2012, Gregson 2007, Korosec–Serafaty 1984). And, as Gregson (2007) observes, what is out of sight generally goes unscrutinized for divestment. And so things accumulate.

The convoy loses items in three circumstances (Ekerdt 2009, Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005, Roster 2001). First, there are exogenous threats to possession, as when objects deteriorate or become functionally unavailable, or they are removed by others. Second, possessions are vulnerable when there is some sort of failure with their capacity for social mediation—they no longer support one’s identity or sociality. Third, life course change invites disposal, for example, when people exit roles, migrate, become disabled, or need to manage age-related vulnerability. With waning strength and stamina, the labour of possession (for example, keeping up the house) may be unsustainable without the help of others.

Over and against the labour of possession, there is also the labour of disposal or dispossession (the latter term is sometimes reserved for the emotional separation from things). Getting rid of things is work at any stage of the life course (Gregson 2007, Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe 2007, Hetherington 2004). The major divestment strategies—giving, selling, donating, trash—require, by turns, calculation, specific occasions, a consideration of the feelings of others (Stum, Bublz and Althoff 2011), know-how, item preparation, and the physical ability to move things around. Environmental rules even make rubbing laborious. Hypothetically, the stock and store of one’s possessions should diminish in later life, consistent with reduced role involvements, social relationships, and the capacity to accommodate belongings. Yet routine possession management appears to wane across the years, as indicated by survey responses in the US to the 2010 wave of the Health and Retirement Study that is biennially fielded among older Americans (http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu). Asked about general efforts to ‘clean out or reduce’ belongings in the past year, claims to have done this ‘many times’ decline across age decades from 23 per cent in the 50s to 13 per cent over age 80. After age 70, about 30 per cent of persons say that they have done nothing in the past year to clean out, give away, or donate things, and over 80 per cent have sold nothing (Ekerdt and Baker 2014).

Along with any age-related arc of accumulation, there is also the matter of cohort behaviour in regard to possession practices. For example, it is reasonable to expect that there are cohort differences in taste, and so we hear in our research that the younger generation fends off gifts from parents (Ekerdt et al. 2012). Cohort influences are commonly invoked to explain peoples’ retention habits. There is a firm conviction—often heard in casual conversation—that people now in their 80s and 90s, having come through the Depression and a world war, are frugal, waste nothing, and keep everything. The oncoming elders of the Baby Boom, by contrast, grew up in an economy of relative abundance when consumer goods were key to the construction of identity (Jones, Higgs and Ekerdt 2009). And so they, too, will have over-provisioned homes in the third and fourth age. As yet, however, current data sources have not allowed confirmation of such cohort effects on possession retention.

The fate of the convoy

Possessions, though personal property, are always a social matter because they mediate relations with others (Dant 1999, Douglas and Isherwood 1996). Their monetary value is a social
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judgment. Their acquisition or disposal for the satisfaction of private needs nevertheless has ethical and environmental implications. Following the life course principle of ‘linked lives’ (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2004), the material convoy of one person or couple is inevitably the material convoy of social counterparts and the convoy’s disposition can become a shared worry. An assembly of apparently personal belongings thus becomes an intergenerational and collective matter.

The benignity of possessions—the way they comfort and delight (so accentuated in studies of cherished possessions)—should not be overlooked. At the same time, the stock and store of belongings can weigh on the mind. Respondents to the 2010 Health and Retirement Study were asked if they were keeping more or fewer things than they need. Among persons aged 60 and older, 35 per cent agreed to having ‘just the right amount’, but 60 per cent claimed to have ‘more things than I need’. Consistent with such opinion, clutter-control manuals urge elders and their adult children to thin the excess stuff of later life (Smith and Ekerdt 2011). In qualitative studies of possession downsizing, elders will claim that the undertaking is a ‘gift’ to their children to relieve them of eventual responsibility for the job (Perry 2012). And ultimately, after death, it will indeed be the responsibility of others (Finch and Hayes 1994). The question of ‘what is to be done’ with it all is an implicit recognition of mortality.

When family and friends step in to become involved in possession management, they can offer themselves as outlets or conduits for things. They do it to be filial, or perhaps in the hope of financial gain. They may stand by helpfully, offering only assistance, or they may assert themselves to accomplish a purge (Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006). The public stake in personal property finds extreme expression in the case of possession hoarders, a condition that confounds mental health professionals. Hoarders resist efforts at remediation by family and friends, and they eventually attract the attention of police and fire officials, public health departments, housing codes enforcement, and animal control (Chapin et al. 2010).

Serious confrontations with the material convoy occur during household disbandments that are undertaken for residential moves (Ekerdt et al. 2004, Marcoux 2001, Perry 2012). What differentiates moves in later life is that the possession downsizings are necessary, comprehensive, and liminal to mortality. The reduction of belongings is necessary because elders almost always move to smaller quarters; comprehensive because the possession management is a whole-house affair; and liminal when it is understood that the move is likely to be undertaken as a concession to age-related limitations (Luborsky, Lysack and Van Nuil 2011). Disbandments might happen more than once if there are serial moves, and the divestment will be radical in the case of moves to care.

These are intense episodes of possession management, and typically stressful owing to time pressure and sheer volume of material. Not surprisingly, the respondents in the Health and Retirement Study in the US felt that possessions were an obstacle to moving. Altogether, three-quarters of persons over age 60 said that their belongings made them ‘somewhat reluctant’ (30 per cent) or ‘very reluctant’ (47 per cent) to move. However, those who do move tend to reflect positively on their downsizing (Ekerdt et al. 2012). By and large they express contentment with what happened: they feel good about it, feel at peace, have no regrets. They may, however, miss this or that belonging and second-guess some things that were done. But they can forgive themselves by recalling the space and time constraints that they faced. The effort also leaves them with a set of stories, a portfolio of anecdotes that sums to more than tales about this or that item. On reflection they can claim to be people who have taken ‘care’ of things, people with agentic selves.

Can possessions create a legacy, ancestralizing or memorializing the person who once had them? It is a strong contention in the literature that people use objects to attempt to transcend
their mortality, depositing a memory of their identity or family heritage in the next generation (Hunter and Rowles 2005, Mansvelt 2012, Marcoux 2001, Marx et al. 2004, Price et al. 2000). But these outcomes are speculative; givers have no way of knowing whether the transfers indeed project desired values, personality, and self into the future. There is copious narrative about households stocked with heirlooms and photographs about which the owners know little except that the things are old, which casts some doubt on legacy creation.

However, the acts of managing and disposing the material convoy can leave a legacy by conserving the social order. During household disbandments, people use heuristics to speed the task, and one of these shortcuts is gender. For selected things, elders typically pass items that have been gendered by possession or design (for example, jewellery or guns) to same-sex recipients and in so doing pass on expectations about how to be a woman or a man (Addington and Ekerdt 2014). Family members’ ties and solidarity can likewise be refreshed as an outcome of helping an elder downsize (Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006). The events can pass into family lore and become part of its story—how ‘we’ cooperated or squabbled in our usual way. The generation-to-generation capture of objects is an enduring reminder that the family has boundaries outside of which some things cannot fall (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004). Their retention within the family also signals that the group endures and remembers.

Conclusion

The varieties and meanings of possessions are endlessly fascinating, and people’s sentiment and deliberation about them is certainly one track that research can take. But there is too much in these things to stop there. The sum of one’s possessions can be conceived to be something as dynamic as the life course itself, as a convoy of material support. Hardly fixed and static, the convoy provisions changing bodies, role involvements, social relationships, developmental thrusts, and the consciousness of time. Just as we can ‘read people’ through their possessions (Miller 2008), so we can leverage insights about age and ageing out of the material things that accompany their lives.

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