Are We What We Own?*

Russell Belk

We cannot hope to gain a comprehensive understanding of compulsive buying without first gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions. A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves (Belk 1988). We are what we have and possess. This is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior.

Treating possessions as extensions of ourselves is not a new phenomenon. William James (1890) observed that:

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 lands, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down, — not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all. [pp. 291–292]

James stipulates that there is also a nonmaterial self, but that a substantial part of who we are is composed of the things we call ours.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the relationship between possessions and our sense of who we are. This relationship is of importance not only for understanding our behavior as consumers but, more important, for understanding how consumption relates to our broader projects in life (Belk 1987a). Defining ourselves by our possessions can contribute to feelings of well-being as well as feelings of emptiness and vulnerability if we believe that we are nothing more than what we own. Overreliance on possessions for self-definition may be manifested in how we shop, how we care for the things we acquire, and the degree to which we cling to our possessions rather than discard them.

A key concept linking the extended self to compulsive shopping is that of materialism. Materialism has been defined as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction" (Belk 1985, p. 265). For the highly materialistic consumer, purchases are potential panaceas for all manners of dissatisfaction with self and with life generally. O'Guinn and Faber (1989) found some aspects of materialism to be related to compulsive shopping tendencies, and Dittmar (1992) found even stronger evidence of such a relationship. To the highly materialistic person, purchases of consumer goods offer the potential for magical transformation of self (Belk 1991a). Buying becomes a transformative ritual intended to precipitate a totally new life; it is an attempt to replay the romantic rebirth of the Cinderella story.

The first section of the material that follows considers evidence that possessions are an important component of the sense of self. The most direct form of evidence is found in the nature of self-
perceptions. The second section addresses the question of what functions the extended self serves for us. It begins with a brief review of the basic states of our existence: having, doing, and being. These states are each potentially critical to self-definition, but for the materialist having becomes all important. Next, the functions of possessions in human development are considered. A central function considered in this section is the role of possessions in creating or maintaining a sense of past.

A third section examines how material objects become a part of the self. A key process in this involves the initial incorporation of objects into our extended selves. A number of incorporation processes are discussed, not all of which involve possession in the sense of individual ownership. A final section discusses the implications that the extended-self construct has for further research on compulsive buying. It briefly reviews the construct of the extended self and offers conclusions.

**POSSESSIONS IN SELF-PERCEPTION RESEARCH**

**Possession as Parts of Self**

Rochberg-Halton (1984) specifies the role of possessions in the project of self-construction: "Valued material possessions . . . act as signs of the self that are essential in their own right for its continued cultivation, and hence the world of meaning that we create for ourselves, and that creates our selves, extends literally into the objective surroundings" (p. 335).

In DeLillo's (1985) postmodern novel *White Noise* it is suggested that while life is brief, the extended self may survive the body:

The dead have faces, automobiles. If you don't know a name, you know a street name, a dog's name, "He drove an orange Mazda." You know a couple of useless things about a person that become major facts of identification and cosmic placement when he dies suddenly, after a short illness, in his own bed with a comforter and matching pillows, on a rainy Wednesday afternoon, feverish, a little congested in the sinuses and chest, thinking about his dry cleaning. [p. 293]

The conflation of person and possessions is even stronger among the living, as James (1890) notes:

It is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are, and arouse the same feelings and the same acts of reprisal if attacked. And our bodies themselves, are they simply ours, or are they us? Certainly men have been ready to disown their very bodies and to regard them as mere vestures, or even as prisons of clay from which they should some day be glad to escape. [p. 291]

Research that has addressed the "things" that are viewed to constitute self (McClelland 1951, Prelinger 1959) has generally found that possessions are second only to body parts and mind in their centrality to self. The particular possessions we see as most a part of ourselves (Belk 1987b) also show a close relationship to the objects we see as most magical, and include perfume, jewelry, clothing, foods, transitional objects, homes, vehicles, pets, religious icons, drugs, gifts, heirlooms, antiques, photographs, souvenirs, and collections (Belk 1991a). McCarthy (1984) concludes that such objects act as reminders and confirmers of our identity, and that this identity may often reside more in these objects than it does in the individual.

In claiming that something is "mine," we also come to believe that the object is "me." How can we explain the particular choice of possessions deemed most critical to self-definition? Besides magical efficacy, control has been suggested to be the critical determinant of feelings of possession (Furby 1978, Tuan 1984). That is, the more we believe we possess or are possessed by an object, the more a part of self it becomes. There is some evidence that men are
more likely than women to value objects for the sense of control that they provide (Lunt and Livingstone 1992). Where men tend to value possessions for self-focused and instrumental reasons, women tend to emphasize expressive and other-oriented reasons for feeling attachment to possessions (Dittmar 1992, Kamptner 1989, Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

Age is another factor affecting the nature of our attachment to possessions. In a three-generational study of favorite possessions, Rochberg-Halton (1984, 1986, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) found that as we age the possessions we cite as “special” tend increasingly to be those that symbolize other people (e.g., gifts from people, photographs of people). They interpret these findings to suggest an age-related widening of the boundaries of self (Rochberg-Halton 1984). These findings may suggest that possessions are not only regarded as a part of self, they may also be instrumental to the “development” of our sense of self. Research on the role that special possessions may play in easing life transitions suggests that possessions can be instrumental to the maintenance of self-concept (e.g., Anderson 1985, McCracken 1987, Nemy 1986). One instance in which possessions provide such a sense of self-continuity is seen in the careful packing, transport, and redeployment of treasured possessions when we move from one locale to another (Belk 1992).

**Investing Self in Objects**

The idea that we make things a part of self by creating or altering them appears to be a universal human belief. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) provide a more psychological explanation in suggesting that we invest “psychic energy” in an object to which we have directed our labor, time, and attention. This energy and its products are regarded as a part of self because they have grown or emerged from the self. Purchasing objects offers another means for investing self (in this case more symbolically) in possessions.

**Ames (1984) records feelings attached to a nineteenth-century purchase of a parlor organ:**

Buying a prominent object like a parlor organ might initiate a new chapter in a set of lives, not only by providing a new way to use time but also a new tool to measure time. In later years the object would serve to remind its owners of the day it first entered their home and of the time that had passed since then. It would not only structure their present but also their perceptions of their own past. They knew from experience that purchasing a major object could be a significant and momentous occasion in itself, a time of heightened positive emotions and feelings of well-being and importance… a major purchase would transform them in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. They would become worth more… and acquire greater status. By so doing they would receive more respect and deference from others which would, in turn, make them feel better about themselves. Buying a parlor organ would make them something they were not before. [pp. 30–31]

In this example we see an instance in which a family possession rather than a personal possession contributes to sense of self. In other cases, such as monuments and landmarks, entire communities or even nations may share these objects as parts of extended self.

The feeling of identity invested in material objects can be extraordinarily high. One of the modern equivalents of the parlor organ, in terms of impact on extended self, is the automobile (Bloch 1981, Myers 1985, Stone 1966, Welland 1955). Niederland and Sholevar (1981) suggest that for many young American males in particular, the automobile is a part of their ego ideals. A shiny new car is experienced very much as a shiny new self. This view is supported by consumer self-concept research (e.g., Bloch 1982, Grubb and Hupp 1968, Jacobson and Kossoff 1963, Munson and Spivey 1980, Ross 1971, Wright et al. 1992). The processes of creating and nurturing extended self through an automobile may also be seen in customizing (personalizing) the car and in lavishing
great care on its maintenance. When such a car is damaged, the
owners react as if their own bodies had been injured. Consider the
sense of personal injury described by Bellow (1975) when a treas­
sured car is assaulted: “Someone had done to my car as rats, I had
heard, did when they raced through warehouses by the thousands
and tore open sacks of flour for the hell of it. I felt a similar rip at
my heart . . . . I had allowed the car to become an extension of my
own self . . . . so that an attack on it was an attack on myself. It
was a moment terribly fertile in reactions* (p. 36).
Furthermore, the possessors of such damaged treasures are
anxious to either restore the auto to its former perfection or
replace it with a more perfect substitute. These reactions reflect
the desire to restore the damaged sense of (extended) self caused
by the injury to the automobile. The owner of an expensive
Porsche described his attachment in this way:

Sometimes I test myself. We have an ancient battered Peugeot,
and I drive it for a week. It rarely breaks, and it gets great
mileage. But when I pull up next to a beautiful woman, I am
still the geek with the glasses.

Then I get back into the Porsche. It roars and tugs to get
moving. It accelerates even going uphill at 80. It leadeth trashy
women . . . . to make pouting looks at me at stoplights. It
makes me feel like a tomcat on the prowl . . . .

. . . . Nothing else in my life compares—except driving
along Sunset at night in the 928, with the sodium-vapor lamps
reflecting off the wine-red finish, with the air inside reeking of
tan glove-leather upholstery and the . . . Blaupunkt playing
the Shirelles so loud it makes my hair vibrate. And with the
girls I will never see again pulling up next to me, giving the car
a once-over, and looking at me as if I were a cool guy, not a
worried, overextended 40-year-old schnook writer. [Stein 1985,
p. 30]

As these examples suggest, the degree to which self becomes
extended into possessions can be great (Belk 1988).
serving in an object capacity as possessions, others are an important mirror through which we may see ourselves. These others first come to associate possessions with possessor and then, depending upon which is known best, infer the traits of one from the other. Belk (1978, 1988), Belk and colleagues (1982), and Holman (1981), review abundant buyer behavior literature supporting this view.

Contrasting Sartre's view that having and being are the central modes of existence is Karl Marx's view that doing, and particularly working, is central to existence and self-worth. The problem with having, in Marx's view, is that it produces a false path to happiness through "commodity fetishism" (Marx 1867). In commodity fetishism goods are worshipped by consumers and believed to have magical powers to bring happiness, provoking a pervasive expectation that happiness lies in the next purchase, or, "I would be happy if I could just have ..." The idea noted earlier of magical transformation via consumer purchases is evident here as well. Both the compulsive consumption and the self-gift literatures (e.g., Mick 1996, Mick and DeMoss 1990, O'Guinn and Faber 1989, Sherry et al. 1995) find goods such as clothing and jewelry to be common foci of compulsive purchases to self and others. Notably, both are worn close to the body and promise potential magical transformation of self. Fairytales are full of magical rings, magical shoes, and other items of adornment that transform their wearers (Belk 1991a). The branded magic of Nike, Armani, and Tiffany represent a highly polished extension of these tales of magic.

While Sartre saw having as the dominant mode of existence and Marx saw certain forms of doing (through meaningful and properly rewarded work [Marx 1842]) as the dominant mode of existence, a third view explicatied by Fromm (1976) completes the possibilities by advocating being as the preeminent form of existence. Like Marx, Fromm attacks "radical hedonism," or the concentration on having, as being unrewarding. He suggests that this view promotes a having mode of existence that views things, experience, time, and life itself as possessions to be acquired and retained. In the alternate being mode of existence that Fromm proposes, this orientation is rejected in favor of an opposing orientation to share, to give, and to sacrifice. The outcome of practicing this being mode of existence, according to Fromm, is to realize one's identity without the threat of losing it inherent in the having mode — for which he asks, "If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?" (Fromm 1976, p. 76).

The views of Sartre, Marx, and Fromm on having, doing, and being present significant philosophical alternatives that it is not necessary or possible to resolve here. All three agree, however, that having possessions functions to create and maintain a sense of self-definition and that having, doing, and being are integrally related. Furthermore, various disciplines share the notion of fetishism as involving an essentially unhealthy investment of self in possessions. As Ellen (1988) argues, Marxist economic's commodity fetishism, anthropology's religious fetishism, and Freudian psychology's sexual fetishism have more commonalities than differences.

Mastery of Possessions and Human Development

Developmental evidence suggests that the identification with our things begins quite early in life when as an infant we learn to distinguish self from environment and then from others who may envy our possessions. Emphasis on material possessions tends to decrease with age, but remains high throughout life as we seek to express ourselves through possessions and use material possessions to seek happiness, remind ourselves of experiences, accomplishments, and other people in our lives, and even create a sense of life after death. Our accumulation of possessions provides a sense of past and tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going.

Self versus Environment

The functions that possessions fulfill in our lives are not constant over our life spans. In infancy the distinction between self and not-self emerges as a result of the contingency and kinesthetic feedback produced by the infant's actions (Lewis and Brooks 1978,
I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM

Seligman 1975). That is, as the infant's motor skills develop, those objects that can be controlled come to be seen as self and those objects that cannot be controlled come to be seen as environment.

According to Isaacs (1933), the mother's caregiving also produces the first sentiments of ownership: “In the case of the infant at the breast, to have is literally and simply to take into oneself, into one's mouth. The nipple is only here at all when it is in my mouth, when it is (in feeling) a part of me. And to bite and swallow a thing is for long the only sure way of retaining it. . . . This is the ultimate form of ownership, from which all others are derived” (p. 226).

Even though the mother provides care, nourishment, and security, her lack of perfect responsiveness to the infant's desires makes it likely that she is the first object that comes to be regarded as not-self. It is also the separation from mother that has led others to suggest that the "security blanket" serves as a transitional object, helping the child to feel the security of the mother through an object that symbolizes her (e.g., Furby and Wilke 1982, Passman 1976, Passman and Halonen 1979, Weisberg and Russell 1971, Winnicott 1953).

If the early changes in person-object relationships may be described as moving from being one with the environment to having objects that aid in the transition to a world where self is distinct from the environment, the next changes may be characterized as moving from having transitional objects to doing things with or to the environment. This motivation has been labeled *competence* (Furby 1980), *mastery* (White 1959), or *efficacy motivation* (Lichtenberg 1989). This concept has been expanded by Furby (1980), who suggests that we develop a stronger sense of self by learning to actively control objects in our environment rather than feeling controlled by them.

Self versus Others

Data from Kline and France (1899) and Isaacs (1935) suggest that the relationship between a person and an object is never as simple as a person-thing bond, however, because other people often seek to control these objects: “A great part of the value of those things which little children want to own is far from intrinsic. It arises directly from the fact that others have or want the object. And thus we enter the open field of rivalry. Not to have what others have, or to have less than they, is to feel shut out from the love and regard of the person giving. It is to be treated as not loveworthy.” (Isaacs 1935, p. 74).

In this sense relationships with objects are always three-way (person-thing-person) relationships. This brings forth a “meum et tuum” concern with object ownership (Beaglehole 1932).

The rivalry aspects of possession seem clear among young children. Horney (1937) suggests that such competitiveness, along with other evidence of lack of affection from parents or peers, leads the child to compensate as an adult through neurotic strivings for power, prestige, and possessions—a pattern that may become manifest in compulsive shopping. Muensterberger (1994; Chapter 7, this volume) finds a similar connection between a felt lack of parental love and compulsive collecting. Whether or not this is a complete explanation of these adult traits, it seems a more plausible basis for adult orientations toward possessions than are explanations via Freudian oral and anal fixations (Belk 1982a). Freud himself was an avid collector of antiquities, but did not apply such explanations to his own or others' collecting activity (Belk 1995).

Although receiving material objects may convey a sense of love and worth to a child, from the parents' point of view control of their children's material possessions as rewards or punishments offers a means of bringing about desired behaviors. The way that parents use such resource-mediated behavioral modification may not only affect behaviors (both those concerning possessions and other behaviors), it may also create new attitudes toward the possessions used as reinforcements. For example, if sweets are withheld or withdrawn, or if threats to do so are made, these actions may simultaneously enhance the value of sweets, encourage the delay of gratifications until unpleasant tasks are completed, or instill an attitude that good performance should be followed by indulgence. The potential effects of such socialization on adult lifestyles are easily envisioned.
Adolescence and Adulthood

Erikson (1959) suggested that adolescents predictably undergo an "identity crisis." One element of this search is that adolescents at this stage increasingly seek identity through acquiring and accumulating selected consumption objects. A study of 8- to 30-year-old Chicagoans by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that this generation was more likely than its parents and grandparents to cite as favorite possessions those that either reflect skills in use (e.g., athletic equipment) or that the possessor can manipulate or control (e.g., music instruments, stereo, pets).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that during preretirement adulthood, emphasis shifts from defining oneself by what one does to defining self through what one has. Furby (1978) found that 40- to 50-year-olds were the most likely of all age groups to cite social power and status as reasons to own personal possessions. Csikszentmihalyi (1982) explains:

A person who owns a nice home, a new car, good furniture, the latest appliances, is recognized by others as having passed the test of personhood in our society. . . . the objects we possess and consume are . . . wanted because . . . they tell us things about ourselves that we need to hear in order to keep ourselves from falling apart. This information includes the social recognition that follows upon the display of status symbols, but it includes also the much more private feedback provided by special household objects that objectify a person's past, present, and future, as well as his or her close relationships. [pp. 5-6]

Olson (1981, 1985) found that young couples cited as favorite objects in the home those that reflected their future plans and goals, while older couples cited objects related to their experiences together as a couple. Cameron (1977) conducted a series of experiments suggesting that having children is a key life event that causes the parents to become less self-focused and more focused on children. Feibleman (1975) notes the emergence by late middle age of a tendency to live vicariously through one's children. Children at this point represent an extension of self, but not to the exclusion of material possessions. In fact, Belk (1985) found parents to be more materialistic and possessive than their children and their own parents. Because of accumulated possessions, well-developed skills, possession of both a past and a future, and parenthood, the middle years of life are also likely to involve the most extended concept of self.

Old Age

If the young are future-oriented, the old are past-oriented. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that for their Chicago sample such possessions as photographs, athletic trophies, and mementos are most treasured by grandparents. The reason most often cited for possessions being treasured by this group was their ability to symbolize others, often because they were gifts from these important others. Sherman and Newman (1977) found that postretirement-age persons who possessed such remembrances were happier than those who did not. Places especially relevant to one's past have also been found to be particularly valued by the old because of the memories they stir (Howell 1983, Lowenthal 1975).

During old age the sense of one's own mortality also becomes more and more undeniable. With decreasing future years, declining skills and abilities, and a shrinking network of old friends, it might be imagined that sense of self contracts as well. However, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, some seek to assure that their self will extend beyond their death. Lifton (1973) suggests five ways in which this may be attempted: (1) through one's children, (2) through belief in a life after death, (3) through one's works, (4) through identification with nature (which will continue), and (5) through experiential transcendence (e.g., absorption in music may allow the person to transcend the world of here and now and symbolically be reborn). A sixth way that is not listed is to have one's possessions (especially those in collections one has created)
“live on” through heirs or museums (Belk 1991b, Rigby and Rigby 1949).

Possessions and the Sense of Past

A general function of possessions across the age continuum is to provide us with a concrete sense of our past. Overall, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) found that the three types of possessions most frequently treasured by the 315 Chicago families they interviewed were furniture, visual art (including that created by family and friends), and photographs. In each case the most frequently given explanation for valuing these objects was the memories they called forth of other people, occasions, and relationships. These reasons overshadowed both functional explanations for attachments to furniture and aesthetic reasons for valuing art objects and photographs.

Integral to a sense of who we are is a sense of our past. Possessions are a convenient means of storing the memories and feelings that evoke our sense of past. A souvenir may make tangible some otherwise intangible travel experience. An heirloom may record and recall family heritage. And a historic monument may help to create a sense of a nation’s past.

The desire to know one’s individual past can explain the retention of personal memorabilia, just as the desire to remember family heritage can explain retention of family heirlooms, and the desire to appreciate national history and achievements can explain museum patronage and visits to historic sites. But what can explain the desire to acquire and collect antiques and antiquities from another time, place, and family? Clearly it is not a claimable sense of past that is achieved at any except the broadest level of identity. Part of the answer lies in the desire to identify with an era, place, or person in which we believe a desirable set of traits or values inhere. At a national level neoclassical architecture seems to have this objective. At a more personal level owning artifacts that once belonged to a famous historical figure seems to share this objective (Rigby and Rigby 1949, Wallendorf and Belk 1987). In each case there appears to be a desire to bask in the glory of the past in the hope that some of it will magically rub off—a form of positive contagious magic (Levi-Strauss 1962/1963). Another reason for the accumulation of antiques that are found or acquired (rather than inherited or claimed on the basis of more direct linkage to the extended self) is that they are necessarily rare and therefore potentially serve as symbols of status or as “status markers” (Douglas and Isherwood 1981).

We can summarize then the functions that possessions play in the extended self as involving the creation, enhancement, and preservation of a sense of identity. Possessions help us at all ages to know who we are. This does not imply, however, that we are always active in selecting the possessions that we see as a part of our selves. As the next section discusses, passive receipt of objects into the extended self also occurs (Belk 1988).

PROCESSES OF SELF-EXTENSION

Ways of Incorporating Possessions into the Extended Self

Sartre (1943) suggests three primary ways through which we may come to regard an object as a part of self. One way is through appropriating or controlling an object for our own personal use, a view similar to McClelland’s (1951) hypothesis that objects are experienced as part of self to the extent that we can exercise power and control over them. Sartre also holds that we can appropriate intangible or nonownable objects by overcoming, conquering, or mastering them. Thus climbing a mountain or living in a city can make these “nonobjects” feel a part of us. And it is only through learning to ride a first bicycle, manipulating a new computer system, driving a first car, or successfully negotiating rapids in a new kayak that these objects really become parts of the extended self. This is an important point, for it provides an explanation of how nondurable products or services and public property or events may come to be viewed as possessions and thereby potentially
contribute to sense of self. A related way of appropriating a second-hand durable possession like a home or an automobile is through cleaning it, and in so doing symbolically removing any contagious traces of former owners. McCracken (1988) describes such cleaning as a possession ritual.

A second way of coming to own an object and incorporating it into self is by creating it—a view echoing anthropological findings and Locke's (1690) labor theory of property—that ownership comes through transformation. Whether the thing created is a material object or an abstract thought, the creator retains an identity in the object as long as it retains a mark or some other association with the person who brought it into existence. This identity is sometimes codified through copyrights, patents, and scientific citations that preserve associations between people and their mental creations.

The third way in which objects may become a part of self is by knowing them (in the biblical sense). Whether the object known is a person, place, or thing, Sartre maintains that the relationship in knowing the object is inspired by a carnal and sexual desire to have the object. Likewise, as Beaglehole (1932) observed, it is our intimate knowledge of a community, store, or book that makes it not only "ours" but also a part of self. It is only when the object is known passionately that it becomes subject rather than object. One way of passionately knowing an object is through collecting it. The cultivation of a collection is a purposeful, self-defining act (Belk 1995). While the collections of both humans and animals were once primarily assemblages of necessities stored in order to be more secure in satisfying future needs, collections today are made of luxuries assembled in order to seek distinction and self-definition (Belk 1982b). As Rigby and Rigby (1949) insightfully observed: "From the small boy to the connoisseur, the joy of standing before one's accumulated pile and being able to say 'this belongs to me' is the culmination of that feeling that begins with ownership of the first item... they become us" (p. 35).

Rather than representing a fourth way of bonding oneself with objects, Sartre believed that buying an object is merely another way of creating the object. For some people money is too abstract, invisible, or "commoditized" (Kopytoff 1986) to become a part of extended self. Nevertheless, money is a highly charged and magical symbol for many people (Belk 1999). If the desire is to extend self through having, then using the money to buy more tangible, visible would-be extensions of self is more likely for such people (Wright et al. 1992). The latent buying power of money can also contribute to sense of self. As Marx (1844) proclaimed, "that which exists for me through the medium of money, that which I can pay for, i.e., which money can buy, that am I, the possessor of money" (p. 377). In this sense we may suppose that money enlarges our sense of self because it enlarges our imagination of all that we might have and do. Money also gives us the power to selectively acquire or reject purchasable objects, thereby more selectively shaping our extended selves. Sartre also sees giving possessions to others as a means to extend self. In giving an object as a gift it will continue to be associated with the giver so that the giver's identity will have been extended to include the recipient.

All three means of making objects a part of extended self outlined by Sartre (control/mastery, creation, and knowledge) are active and intentional ways of self-extension. Clothing (Solomon 1986), housing (Jaeger 1985), and automobiles are all acquired as a "second skin" that others often use to make inferences about us. Objects such as land to the farmer, crafts pieces to the craftsman, and artworks to the artist may become a part of extended self because we have intentionally worked on or created these things, investing both energy and self in them. These are clearly all active processes. But objects like household furnishings may also become a part of us through the knowledge that comes with habituation—they have become part of our familiar interior landscape, have been the setting for numerous special as well as ordinary occurrences in our lives, and often have received the same amount of care and attention that we lavish upon ourselves and immediate family members. During their tenure with us, a great many memories are likely to have accreted in these objects. Thus not all forms of self-extension are active and intentional. Self-extension can also
come about through the gradual accommodation of objects in our lives and the slow accretion of meaning in objects that have taken their place with us.

CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPULSIVE CONSUMPTION RESEARCH

The possessions incorporated in extended self serve valuable functions for healthy personalities. One such function is acting as an objective manifestation of self: an exterior representation of our interior structures. As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) note, such possessions are “good for thinking.” They help us manipulate our possibilities and present the self to others in a way that is able to garner feedback from those who are reluctant to respond so openly to the unextended self.

The possessions in our extended self also give us a personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and see how we have changed. Through heirlooms, the family is able to build a similar archive and allow individual family members to gain a sense of permanence and place in the world that extends beyond their own lives and accomplishments. Communities, nations, and other group levels of self are similarly constituted via monuments, buildings, books, music, and other created works. The association of these artifacts with various group levels of self provides a sense of community that is essential to group harmony, spirit, and cooperation. In addition, natural wonders can be incorporated into extended self in such a way that we have an even greater feeling of immortality and place in the world.

This is not to suggest that extending self into material possessions has only positive effects. Research on materialism reveals some of the negative consequences of relying on possessions to provide meaning in life (e.g., Dittmar 1992). Money can be explosively and wastefully spent on consumer goods, sometimes because we feel we do not deserve to have wealth (Belk 1991a; Boundy, Chapter 1, this volume). However, it is likely that attempted self-enlargement or compensation for a diminished sense of self motivates compulsive consumption more than does the wish to rid ourselves of money. The materialist has a magical, optimistic belief in the efficacy of consumer goods to bring about a total transformation of current life to one that is far, far better—a romantic belief in a fairy tale of transcendent consumption. This magical and unrealistic belief seems more intimately connected to compulsive consumption than does the self-punitive waste of money. Whatever the motivation for compulsive consumption, there can be extremely negative consequences to building a sense of self that is externally manifest, because the inner core self is likely to feel more and more empty and more vulnerable as this process continues over a lifetime. Moreover, when attempts to enhance self through accumulating possessions results in the compulsive acquisition of consumer goods, using purchasing as an intended mood enhancer and possessions to compensate for a lack of significant others in our lives, more psychological harm than good may result.

This does not mean that compulsive consumption is caused only by the desire for contributing to our extended self through ownership of possessions. The process of acquisition may be more likely than the process of possession to be the main source of gratification in compulsive buying. But whether or not this is the case may depend upon the degree of compulsion, as Schor (1998) argues:

Using the same test [as Faber and O'Guinn 1992] on a group of mostly college students in Arizona, Allison Magee [1994] estimated 15–16 percent [are compulsive buyers]. (We know the tendency is greater among youth.) On the other hand, clinically defined compulsives may not be fundamentally different from “normal” consumers. They're just the extreme cases. Millions of ordinary people also exhibit high “generalized urges to buy.” Indeed, an innocuous form of compulsive buying appears to afflict one-quarter of us. This should probably come as no surprise in a country [the U.S.A.] where 41 percent of the population age 22–61 (and nearly half of all young
adults) say that "shopping makes me feel good" [Farkas and Johnson 1997, p. 159]

The more generous estimates of compulsive buying here are based on Natarajan and Goff (1991), who suggest that as many as one-fourth of Americans indulge in a relatively innocuous form of compulsive buying. These estimates are also consistent with others who view compulsive buying and normal buying as lying on a continuum rather than forming discrete categories (e.g., d’Astous 1990, Edwards 1993, Valence et al. 1988). Even more inclusively Frank (1999) concludes: “Fearing they will gamble too much, many people limit the amount of cash they take to Atlantic City. Fearing they will stay up too late watching TV, they move the television out of the bedroom. In varying degrees, Ainslie (1992) argues, we are all addicts of a sort, battling food, cigarettes, alcohol, TV sports, detective novels, and a host of other seductive activities.” [p. 185]

With such a view in mind, Lunt and Livingstone (1992) characterize the credit card-aided purchase of luxury goods as a seduction that makes self-discipline extremely difficult. Similar to the resistance tactics noted by Frank (1999), they identify a number of coping strategies by which consumers seek to impose a degree of self-control on their buying activities (Livingstone and Lunt 1992, Lunt and Livingstone 1992).

Still, certainly not all consumer buying or even all consumer buying that is intended to enlarge the extended self can be considered compulsive. Context is important. Sometimes the factor that motivates a compulsive purchase is a feeling of entitlement (Belk 1987b). But perhaps the most common situational condition that may shift a given purchase into a compulsive action is a sense of emptiness in the self, or what Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) characterize as the drive for symbolic self-completion. Ironically, as noted above, the greater the tendency for the person to rely on material possessions to constitute self, the greater the emptiness in sense of self that a compulsive shopper is likely to feel. This in turn is likely to stimulate further efforts to fill the void with attractive material goods, and the vicious cycle continues.

REFERENCES


