

Objects and Agency: An Ethnographic Research on University Teachers

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Abstract

Based on qualitative research, this study examines university teachers' favorite objects in order to understand the roles of those objects in their lives- how they give meanings to objects which are kept by them for a long time, why they keep objects which are not in use. Data were gathered through personal narratives by interview and case studies on favorite objects of twenty faculty members – ten female and ten male of different age groups and designations living on campus and off campus. The findings of this research reveal the relationship between university teachers and their favorite objects. Although, same types of objects are not favorite to all participants, all are attached to the objects in a common way as 'memory bearing agents'. Favorite objects of possession are photographs, things used by deceased parents, gold wedding rings, gifts with archaeological values, objects redeeming childhood memories, things acquired by inheritance, and things in collection. These objects are playing roles in the participants' life as objects containing agency, objects of affection having psychological effects, biographical things and things as social actors which are interconnected with more than one memory. This research provides valuable insights of the role of favorite objects and the relationship between those objects and the owners. From the perspective of material culture approach, this research explores Chittagong University teachers' favorite objects and how these work as agency.

Keywords: favorite object, roles, relationships, university teacher, and material culture.

Introduction

Objects which are considered more valuable than any other objects give comfort and peace of mind to people for some reasons. According to Wallendorf and Arnoud (1988), the values are of different categories which may serve as functional, prestigious, spiritual, or displayable. In addition to

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value, objects can be given meanings. People try to keep objects most of their lifetime or till death, even with faded colors, distorted sizes, or without durability. People find strong ties with objects which represent other people. Conducting research on university teachers' favorite objects would reveal some more interesting information. This study focuses on how everyday or special objects are related to life of university teachers. This study examines the agencies that faculty members find in their objects. It also explores if university teachers discard their favorite objects when those lose their longevity. This study looks at if there is any gender differentiation in liking objects.

Literature review

There are numerous scholarly writings on material cultures, for instance by Miller (1994), Tilley (2006), Woodward (2007), Jones (2007), Kopytoff (1986), Pearce (1994), Appadurai (1986), Wallendorf (1988), of different countries. Material culture is the study of human social and environmental relationships through the evidence of people's construction of their material world (Miller 1994). There are no restrictions on things in categorizing material culture. It is anything regardless of time, space, and place. According to Tilley (2006) material culture can be "anything from a packet of fast food to a house to an entire landscape, and either in the past or in the present, within contemporary urban and industrial cultures in the United States and Europe, to small-scale societies in Africa, Asia, or the Pacific". People and their favorite things are inseparable in their lives and things that they value are tied together. For example, according to Hoskins (1998) the Kodi people at the Western tip of the Eastern Indonesian Island of Sumba and the things they valued were intertwined in such complex ways they could not be disentangled.

Object biography is an analytical process. This process is a way to reveal and understand object agency in material culture. Schambergers et al. (2008) give examples from Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshal that an object biography examines an artifact's life history to "address the way social interactions involving people and objects create meaning. This helps understand how these meanings 'change and are renegotiated through the life of an object.'" Such a biography might include information about an object's genealogy, its manufacture, use, possession, exchange, alteration, movement, and destruction or preservation, obtained from a wide variety of sources. Hoskins (1998) reported that biographical objects grow old, and may become worn, and tattered along the lifespan of its owner "... biographical objects share our life with us, and if they gradually deteriorate

and fade with the years, we recognize our own aging in the mirror of these personal possessions”. He also noted that “... it is agents, not systems which act”. Woodward (2007) noted that objects are biographical which means the former aspects of self. Kopytoff (1986) describes a biography of a hut’s life expectancy among Suku of Zaire which is about ten years. The typical biography of a hut begins with its housing a couple or, in a polygynous household, a wife with her children. As the hut ages, it is successively turned into a guest house or a house for a widow, a teenagers’ hangout, kitchen, and, finally, goat or chicken house – until at last the termites win and the structure collapses.

Agency is an important issue in material culture to find out the relationship between people and objects. Gell (1998) reports that an agent is like a source. This is the origin of causal events. Robert Layton (2003) says that Gell identifies four types of agency that art objects can possess. These are psychological, physical, aesthetic, and semiotical. Gell (Ibid) specifically rejects the notion that they always do so.

Objects also serve as a container of memory (Andrew Jones 1994, Susan Pierce 1994). Andrew Jones noted not only ‘how societies remember’ but also ‘how things help societies remember.’ Jones’s (2007) examples are derived from Scottish Neolithic and Bronze age where he argues that to mentally store our memories, human societies have produced a series of devices for storing memory in extra bodily form. For example, clay and stone tablets, curved stae, and, at a later stage in history, maps, drawings, photographs, phonographs and other recording technologies, and finally the computer. Pearce (1994) gives example from Barthes that the [a] jacket is a sign, uniting the message (the signified) and the physical embodiment of the signifier. Gender differentiation might have difference in choosing favorite objects. Hoskins (1998) believes that women as much as men are able to construct themselves as reference points for their own acts.

Malanie Wallendorf and Eric J. Arnould studied favorite things of citizens of USA and Niger. This is the study which relates with the present research specifically. The study reveals that in the USA participants give meaning to favorite objects which come more from ‘personal memories’. On the other hand, participants from Niger give favorite objects meaning from ‘social status’ rather than object characteristics. The present research focuses on understanding the issues like object biography, object agency, object as container of memory, and gender difference in choosing cherished objects

to explore the relationships between Chittagong University teachers’ and their favorite objects.

Methodology

This study was conducted on Chittagong University campus in Hathazari, Chittagong in the month of January, 2019. Twenty University teachers from different departments were selected by purposive sampling. Box-1 shows the number of participants, age group, participants code name and the names of the departments. Participants have been mentioned in code names. Two of the participants are not-married and one of the participants lives off campus. Each interview took 35-45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Data of this research are analyzed by reviewing interview transcripts which were based on narratives of favorite objects of participants. Themes were selected from the interview guide and from the participants’ responses as well. These themes were then discussed in light of the objectives of the research. University teachers and the relationships with objects that they possess are of varied types.

Box 1. Participants Characterization

Number of participants	Age	Designation and Gender		Department
		M	F	
01	60-70	Professor, L		Sociology
02	60-70	Professor, M	Professor, B	Political Science
02	40-50	Professor, MU Professor, MJ		Chemistry
01	40-50		Associate Professor, N	Genetic Engineering and Technology
02	40-50	Associate Professor, MA	Associate Professor, S	Geography
02	40-50	Professor, MI, Professor, H		Physics
02	30-40	Assistant Professor, R	Professor, LS	Law
01	30-40		Assistant Professor, SB	Islamic History
01	30-40	Assistant Professor, I		Physical Education
02	30-40	Assistant Professor, B	Assistant Professor, J	Political Science
01	20-30		Lecturer, TM	Institute of Education and Research
03	30-40		Lecturer, NS, NH, SS	Psychology (3)

Source: Field research

Findings

The following case studies describe the relationships between the university teachers and the things that they preserve. The first case study reveals how specific things got by inheritance tell us about the memories of the past way

of life even though some are non-existent at present. This case also presents memories which are interconnected with more than one incident. In addition, it also presents that gifts once used which has no use value at present are still kept by the owners; these things are working as agency. The second case study illustrates the biography of things which also explores biography of the object keepers at the same time.

Case study I

Professor L (67) is from northeast of Bangladesh. He has a son and a daughter, and his wife is a home-maker. He had his graduation from Dhaka University, and since then he had been teaching at CU for 35 years.

At the time of war in 1971, he had some precious things in his possession at home which were all destroyed by Pakistani soldiers. Things which were used in the past can also make some relationship with the people in the present.

When he was asked about his favorite things, he said that his mother got a big vault from her father by inheritance. They brought this to their home by boat when they were little. This was related with his mother's childhood and also his. It was so big that they could even sleep on it. His grandfather had collections of Nagri² written script/puthi. Later his father used to recite them. They used to keep those scripts inside the vault. His father had horses and rifles to hunt birds. He used to ride those horses, and also passed under the horses (he laughed). When horses were no more, his parents preserved the straps for a long time inside the vault. His grandfather was gifted two Vrindabani Hookahs³ from his great-grandfather, which were 3-4 and 5-6 feet high. Those were made of silver with curving designs. When the elders arranged programs, these were used by the guests. The pipes of the Hukkahs could be stretched long and went to everybody's mouth one after another sitting in the gathering. The small one was used in small gatherings and the big one was for big ones. These two were kept by the vault. These things were destroyed in 1971 war. Pictures of these things come up to his mind sometimes; this is the memory of his family.

He got a pen as a gift from his maternal cousin when he went to England to visit him in 1976. It was very nice and heavy. It used to write well. But, a year ago, that pen fell down while the family was organizing things in the

² An endangered writing system of the Brahmic family historically used in the Sylhet region. Its manuscript is also found in India.

³ A single or multi-stemmed instrument for vaporizing and smoking flavored tobacco, in the past

showcase, and broke in his hand. It is not working since then, but he is preserving it as a memory of his cousin; as a memory of the past. It has a very nice blue-red-yellow design. This type of pen is not common now-a-days. It used to write very well and was expensive.

Case study II

N is a professor of Genetic Engineering and technology, CU. She has been teaching for ten years living on campus. She got her PhD from Japan. She comes from an educated family.

When she was asked about her favorite objects, she talked in details about it. The background of that object- the color, texture, longevity of that object; a specific time of her life; the person related with that object; and her memory attached to it. When she was an honors student in Genetic Engineering in Chittagong University, her father brought a sari for her from India when he was doing his PhD there. It was Yellowish in color. She was asked by her father to pick one, and she had chosen that. She was so happy to get it. Even the age of this sari is more than three decades, she still has it in her Almira⁴. Sometimes she wears this to some occasions of the university and people don't even understand that this sari is so old. Even though the sari had been fading, she said that she is keeping it because it has her father's memory in it.

Reasons for preserving favorite objects by the participants

Photographs

All of the participants talked about photographs that are favorite to them and they intend to keep these forever. Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. In Batchen's study (Edwards, 2004), Photographs have 'volume, opacity, tactility, and a physical presence in the world' and are thus enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions. These are true for the participants. When the participants look into the photographs of their relatives, dead or alive, they go back to their past life associated with lots of memories.

Participants reported that a photograph reminds them of their dead relatives, and some important incidents of life. All of the participants talked about keeping a particular picture which reminds them of their past. Four of them remember their dead parents, one of them remembers his dead baby daughter, all of them remember their wedding days, four of them remember

⁴ A wooden or steel box to store things

their childhood incidents, and four of them remember their children's childhood incidents.

According to all participants, a single picture tells about various incidents of life. All of the participants said that they are saving their parents' picture in the photo album. Among them, five of them framed their parents' pictures and keep these in the Almira so that they will be safe for a longer time. All of them said that sometimes they look at their parents' pictures and remember so many things of the past and sometimes get emotional. All of them keep their wedding pictures and their children's childhood pictures in the album. Professor L said, "Sometime my wife and I see these pictures in leisure time and talk about our past."

Things Used by Deceased Parents

Four of the participants reported about keeping their dead parents' used things as a remembrance to them. One of the participants reported that he stores his dead father's tie, suit, magnifying glass, walking stick, and diary as memories. Sometimes, he takes these out of the Almira and thinks about his father. His father bought the suit when he was working in Katar as an engineer. He is saving it in the Almira, sometimes he wears it. Another participant reported of keeping false teeth, sunglasses, and astrological figure ring of her dead father. Four participants are keeping diaries of their dead fathers, which they read sometimes and remember them. These are all a feeling of attachment with the participants' dead parents.

Gifts

People exchanges gifts in all societies of the world. A Gift is a thing which makes people happy to get, and entails social attachment to the takers and givers. In this research, it is explored that university teachers give emphasis to sari, marriage gifts, gold gifts, and also gifts from other people.

Every Bangladeshi woman wears sari even once in a lifetime. Village women wear sari almost everyday. This dress is wearable to teenagers on many occasions. But as a girl grows up, she is fascinated by wearing and keeping saris in possession. In this study, all of the female participants think, Sari is the most wearable dress in Bangladesh. All of the female faculty members reported that they have fascination for this dress and are keeping it in their favorite list. One of the participants got a sari from her mother's brother's wife (mami in Bengali), all of them got saris from their mothers at their weddings, and four of them got a gift from her father before they got married. All of the saris are famous by their names and design. All of the female participants said that at present they do not wear

the saris rather these are well preserved in different ways. They keep those in the Almira and sometimes take those out to keep under the sun to kill insects. They learned the techniques to preserve sari from their mothers. All of the saris are 2 to 4 decades old. Even these are not usable due to old age; these are kept with great care. In this research, respondents keep saris in their stock as a remembrance of their relatives including parents and other maternal relatives. They want to keep them as long as they can. Not every participant want to hand the sari over to her daughter.

All of the participants talked about wedding gifts as their favorites. These are gold jewelry: wedding ring, and wedding dress: sari and shirt. All of the male participants said that they prefer to keep wedding gifts given by their in-laws. Though male shirts are not expensive like wedding sari and jewelry, all male participants feel an affection towards those and want to preserve those for longer time than other things they have. Dr. M said, "My mother-in-law gave me a shirt as a marriage gift to me. I wore it 2-3 times and still keeping it with me for 18 years".

Gold is considered precious in Bangladesh society. Usually people keep gold as possessions. Some people give gold as gifts to near ones and some people buy gold jewelry for themselves. All the female participants reported that they will keep specific gold gifts from their parents. They want to keep those not only for value in money, but also to store memory in it. All of them said they will never sell these gifts even in any hardship of life. Two of the participants used all their gold for their spouses' business purposes, but not the wedding ring. One of them said, "My in-laws gave me a big ring in the very first night of my marriage. I sold all other gold of mine for my husband's business, but I did not exchange this ring, and I never will. I don't use it much, but a few days ago I went somewhere wearing it and everyone asked me if it was new." All of the male participants reported similar views of keeping the gold wedding ring.

Significant Gifts with Archaeological Values

Objects which are not expensive, but have archaeological value are kept by participants. Six respondents talk about keeping an object which is of no use in monetary value, but has significance due to its archaeological value.

One participant mentioned getting a mud-pot as a gift from an old rickshaw-puller. This was his forefathers' possession and it was hundred and fifty years old. The participant said, "I wanted to have it, and he gave it to me right away without any hesitation."

Gifts that the participants preserve are not only expensive objects, but also simple ones.

Objects Redeeming Childhood Memories

All of the respondents said that, things bring back childhood memories. One of the participants reported that his father brought a carpenter home to make a reading table for him when he was a little boy. He used to sit on it most of the time after it was finally made. It had a drawer; he used to keep things in it. He said, "I was so happy to get it." His mother used to ask him why he was sitting there even when he was not studying. He was happy because it was made only for him. Before he used to sit on his father's table, but that time he had his own to sit on. This table is still there and when his son goes to the village, he sits on it.

Two of the female participants reported about dresses that they had embroidered when they were teenagers. They designed it with crochet and beads. Both of their daughters are wearing these now. All of the participants talk more of memory surrounded with a specific thing.

Things Acquired by Inheritance

People inherit things from their forefathers and preserve these for longer time. In this research, participants have inherited and saved deer horn, books, sewing machine, water holding pot, and mirror from their fathers. Assistant Professor SB noted, "anything can be given to the next generation. It's like children getting something from father. No matter what it is, we use it or not. My uncles and my father got things which belonged to my grand-father, I got some of those. For example, a deer horn; they used to hunt at that time." She also noted that she has inherited some books from her mother's side one of which was published in 1901. She got those books from her mother's brother's wife (mami in Bangla). These were her uncle's collection and he was the student of the first batch of History department in Dhaka University. But he couldn't finish his studies due to some political issues. He used to read a lot. He also used to write in different daily Newspapers like Islamic Foundation, daily Azadi, and other local papers. Their house was beside the Jame Mosque, at Andarkilla, Chittagong, a famous place for books in Chittagong. He did not have any children. There was an English book of 12-15 pages published in 1901. Like Asst. Prof SB, R also said that he had inherited books from his father. Two of the participants reported that they inherited sewing machines and brass pots from their maternal grandmothers from Pakistan period.

Personal Collection

In this research participants have collected and saved things that they like to collect. They are fond of collecting old things. These are coins, crockeries (a glass bowl), and a wall mirror. Seven of the participants noted that they had silver coins in collection inherited from paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents. Two of these are silver coins from the British period. Two of the participants collected dinner sets, from their paternal grandparents, made in Germany and England, both of which are from the British India period. One of the participants reported to have a small scissors in collection from her father-in-law.

One of the participants inherited a mirror of old time. Assistant Professor SB noted,

My father-in-law gifted me a mirror, which was a part of a dressing table almost 100 years old. He gave me that because he understood that not everyone collects an old thing and knows the value of it. He thought I would keep it safe. The original mirror went bad, I placed a new mirror there, but the frame is the old one. I think this frame is hundred years old. The design tells us an image of Zamindari vibes. It has borfi design and the upper side of the frame is curved with peacocks and Kolka shape. The color is Mehegoni/ deep chocolate which was a common colour in the past.

Object possessed by inheritance are usually expensive, but all of the examples here are not expensive.

Discussion

This paper focuses on understanding the favorite objects of Chittagong University teachers which revealed some significant findings which are similar to and also dissimilar from the theories given by scholars on 'objects'. In this research, I explored the favorite objects playing significant roles in the participants' social life. Results of this study indicate that the participants possess five types of relationships with their favorite objects. These are,

- 1) objects having agency (memory bearing agent)
- 2) objects of affection with psychological effects. Biographical things work as social actors which are interconnected with more than one memory
- 3) keeping objects regardless of gender difference
- 4) gifts are more favorite rather than self bought

Objects in this research work as memory bearing agency for university teachers. So-called useless objects of the participants, such as objects used by deceased parents, are saved in the Almira properly by the participants because of these having memory of near and dear ones. In this context, these objects serve as agency of memory and these memories come back when it is used for a specific purpose by the owner. The study presented here sets its focus on understanding how objects, such as photographs, things used by deceased parents, etc. work as agents of memories. All participants regardless of gender difference reported that photographs give them memories of the past of both happy and sad incidents. Asst. Prof. R noted,

My son was born on April 27th, 2018. I have a picture with my baby son on my lap. I was so happy taking him on my lap for the first time after he was released from the incubator of the hospital! It has a different feeling. The picture was taken by my brother-in-law. At the same time, whenever I see this picture, I also remember my other baby, my first child, a daughter, who died a year ago before my son was born, and whom I couldn't even took on my lap. She died in the incubator.

In this research Photographs serve like agents. Edwards and Hart (2004) discusses that Photographs exist materially in the world...Photographs are both images and physical objects that exists in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. Hoskins (2006) also states that objects are made to act upon the world and on the persons [people]; otherwise they would not be created. Therefore, objects do indeed possess an innate agency given to them by humans that allows them to affect change. Hoskins (2006) also cites Gell, who felt that "things have agency because they produce effects, because they make us feel happy, angry, fearful, or lustful. They have an impact, and we as artists produce them as ways of distributing elements of our own efficacy in the form of things". In this research, objects used in the past by relatives, also work as agents in bringing back memories of the past. Gell (2004) argued that objects themselves can be seen as social actors, in that it is not the meanings of things per se that are important but their social effects as they construct and influence the field of social action in ways that would not have occurred if they did not exist in this or that. This study focuses on how favorite things of university teachers work as social actors.

A psychological presence is also present regarding favorite objects in all participants of this study. Their emotions are attached with things which is consistent with Carl Knappett's (2001) theory that if an artifact holds any kind of psychological presence, it is only a secondary effect of its connection with human protagonists, the real and primary agents.

It is found in this study that, objects which had commodity value in previous time do not fulfill its purpose at present if it's ruined or damaged. But, these are still well-preserved by the owners for a long time. All of the participants mentioned that they will keep their favorite things even if they lose their usability. Even in hardship some people do not want to give away their favorite objects. As Kopytoff (1986) said, commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing. Out of the total range of the things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities. Moreover, the same thing may be treated as commodity at one time and not at another, the same thing may at the same time be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another. In this research, preserving things without any exchange value or commodity value is a common phenomenon to the participants.

Four of the participants, two male and two female reported that, they keep their favorite things though those objects have no use value now because they are ruined or broken. This result is inconsistent with Tilley (2006) that the meaning of an object is born when that object is used towards a purpose by a group. Meaning is created out of situated, contextualized social action which is in continuous dialectic relationship with generative rule-based structures forming both a medium for and an outcome of an action (Ibid). Two of the female participants noted that they tailored a dress for them when they were teenagers and made flowery designs in it. They both wanted to keep it forever, but one of them reported that she still has it and her teenage daughter wears it now. All participants said they want to keep the things that they got from their parents. They feel intense affection towards those things. This result is consistent with Hodder (2004) that humans are intentional in their creation of objects. He said, "a person's creation of an object automatically imbues that object with a certain purpose that its creation aims to fulfill. People use the material objects they produce ... to manipulate their worlds."

All of the participants of both genders started saying details of a particular thing's past and present when they were asked about their favorite objects.

This result gives a clear idea about how things tell the stories of the participants' lives and also act as social actors. Gell argues that objects themselves can be seen as social actors, in that it is not the meanings of things per se that are important but their social effects as they construct and influence the field of social actions. This study focuses on how favorite things of university teachers work as social actors.

The most commonly used notion in material culture is object (Hoskins, 2006) or thing to understand relationships between objects and people which is true for all genders in this research. All of the participants reported that their favorite objects are either functioning at present, or they can give meaning to the objects that do not have functioning ability by manifesting past incidents of their lives. Both genders preserve clothing as their favorite object. All of these are wedding gifts from relatives. All female participants have fascination for sari more than other kinds of dresses; no one reported salwar kamiz, or pants, or shirt as gifts. In this study, none of the participants mentioned paintings as their favorite objects.

There are no self bought objects reported as favorite to the participants. All objects considered as favorite are gifts.

Conclusion

This paper fills the gap as there are no such studies which can tell us about university teachers' favorite objects and the reasons behind keeping those objects. The results of this research give insights of relationships between humans and objects to the broader readership. This will also provide a picture of university teachers' likings and attachment to things of various kinds. The objects make some sort of real impact on the mental or physical state of the participants. This study presents that university teachers also have different kinds of favorite objects and want to keep these for the rest of their lives or may be pass those to their next generation. Chittagong University teacher's cherished objects have ties with memories with other people, mostly relatives. The paper also reports that having degrees from reputed universities with higher grades, university faculties also keep broken gifts even if these are of no use. They even keep some objects even if they are in extreme hardship, they do not want to lose them by any means. This shows a sense of attachments with their relatives. This research explores how memory is created and recreated as biography around favorite objects given by close relatives. Though university teachers' favorite objects have different agencies, all objects are interrelated with the participants socially or emotionally.

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