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Nurturing Self: Psychotherapeutic Implications of Women's Reflections on the Meaning of their Cherished Possessions

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Abstract

Experiencing the importance of one's personal treasures is ubiquitous to the human experience, but what is the depth and meaning of this lived phenomenon? An interpretive phenomenological method was used to explore the meaning and significance of women's experience of their cherished personal possessions. Nine women participated in three individual semi-structured phenomenological interviews each. Interpretive analysis revealed that women's experience of their cherished personal possessions is one of nurturing self. Through their cherished personal possessions, women nurture their sense of self by connecting with others, affirming personal experience, supporting self through change, and cultivating a sense of self. Implications for responsive psychotherapeutic practice with women clients are identified.

Keywords

Women, Feminist Methodologies, Active Interviews, Clinical Research, Interpretive Phenomenology

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Nurturing Self: Psychotherapeutic Implications of Women's Reflections on the Meaning of their Cherished Possessions

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Experiencing the importance of one's personal treasures is ubiquitous to the human experience, but what is the depth and meaning of this lived phenomenon? An interpretive phenomenological method was used to explore the meaning and significance of women's experience of their cherished personal possessions. Nine women participated in three individual semi-structured phenomenological interviews each. Interpretive analysis revealed that women's experience of their cherished personal possessions is one of nurturing self. Through their cherished personal possessions, women nurture their sense of self by connecting with others, affirming personal experience, supporting self through change, and cultivating a sense of self. Implications for responsive psychotherapeutic practice with women clients are identified. Keywords: Women, Feminist Methodologies, Active Interviews, Clinical Research, Interpretive Phenomenology

Most people can identify with the experience of collecting and protecting personal treasures. However, this experience and the depth of meaning individuals attach to such objects remains relatively understudied. The majority of empirical and theoretical work on the meaning we ascribe to things derives from the fields of consumer research, marketing, and nursing and focuses on possessions in general, rather than those considered "most treasured" (Kamptner, 1991). Any "thing" to which we are emotionally attached can represent a cherished personal possession (Belk, 1989, 1992). Such possessions tend to have "... intense symbolic meanings that defy rational explanations and sober reasoning" (Belk, 1991a, p. 19) and appear to be involved in the creation, enhancement, and preservation of a sense of personal identity (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kamptner, Kayano, & Peterson, 1989; Whitmore, 2001).

The propensity to develop affective attachments to things, and to imbue them with phenomenologically relevant meanings occurs throughout the life span for both genders (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dyl & Wapner, 1996; Kamptner et al., 1989; Myers, 1985; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988; Whitmore, 2001) and across cultures (Joy & Dholakia, 1991; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). In fact, the study of peoples' cherished possessions has been referred to as the study of human psychosocial development in a microcosm (Kamptner et al., 1989). Cherished items are thought to function as signs to the self (Dittmar, 1989, 1991; Prentice, 1987; Rochberg-Halton, 1984) and provide a useful methodological tool for investigating aspects of persons' experience of self in context (Dittmar, 1991; Redfoot & Black, 1988; Whitmore, 2001).

There is little written in the psychology of women and psychotherapy literature regarding women's experience of their cherished personal possessions and what this experience may suggest for understanding and working with women in psychotherapy. Of the sparse research that has been conducted, it appears that women tend to value the emotional, relational, and symbolic elements of their possessions, while men value possessions for their self-referent and utilitarian elements (Dittmar, 1989, 1991; Kamptner et al., 1989; Kamptner, 1991; Sherman, 1991; Wallendorf & Arnold, 1988; Wapner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990). These findings correspond to the empirical and theoretical work in the area of the psychology of

women, which suggests that women's identity develops through their experience of connection with others, and is commonly referred to as the "relational self" (Enns, 1991; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1991). As the goal of this inquiry was to extend understanding of the meaning and significance of women's cherished personal possessions, an interpretive phenomenological method was appropriate (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Munhall & Boyd, 1993; Osborne, 1990, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

Interpretive Phenomenology

The fundamental objective of phenomenology is to uncover the essence of a particular human experience, thereby answering the question of what it is like to have a particular human experience (Spinelli, 1989). Interpretive phenomenology yields a thematic account, which elucidates various facets of a particular human experience, which may become more refined with further inquiry (Addison, 1989; Bergum, 1991; Osborne, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). From this perspective, essence(s), or core meanings are not considered to be universal; rather, such meanings are domain specific and contextual (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Participants

Through "snowball" sampling (Merriam, 2002), nine women were recruited for inclusion in the study. Each woman was able to: a) acknowledge that she had the experience of having cherished personal possessions; and, b) articulate her experience. The women ranged in age from 27 to 69 years. Four of the women were living in marriage or common law relationships, five relationship breakups via divorce were reported, three women commented on being single without a current interest in a significant other, one single woman was enjoying a new partnership, and one woman was widowed and currently involved with a partner. Of these nine women, eight were heterosexual and one was lesbian. Three of the women had no children, two were living with a partner who had children, and four each had three children of their own. All of the women were Canadians of mixed English, British, European background, with English as their first language. The women also reported varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Seven of the women had achieved, or were pursuing, varying levels of post-secondary education; two had completed high school and not pursued additional training. Two of the women were retired, the other seven were either attending school, working for pay, or doing a combination of both.

Data Generation

Three phenomenological interviews (Moustakas, 1994) per participant were used to generate data. Each of these interviews involved an interpersonal engagement wherein women were encouraged to share the details of their experience of their cherished personal possessions. Prior to the first meeting, the women were requested to consider and select a small collection of their most cherished treasures to bring to the interview, which provided the primary focus and structure for the first interview. The women brought between two to seven cherished possessions each to their first interview. The first interview focused on encouraging an in-depth description of their experience of their selected cherished personal possessions; the second interview served as an extension of the first interview and occurred within two weeks' time; and the third interview occurred after all the first and second interviews with each woman were completed, transcribed, and analyzed in depth, and focused on encouraging each woman's feedback on the composite interpretive phenomenological account. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Data analysis took the form of a recursive, dialogical process beginning immediately and continuing through the course of this research process and involved a constant shifting back and forth between whole and part, part and whole (Leonard, 1989). Oiler-Boyd and Munhall (1993) contend that the importance of data analysis as a creative process cannot be overemphasized. The process of grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound activity, but a free act of “seeing” meaning (Van Manen, 1990).

The following eight general phases of data analysis assisted in revealing the essence of women’s experience of their cherished personal possessions: (1) each individual transcript was read and the audiotape reviewed to grasp a sense of the “whole” (Benner, 1985; Osborne, 1994); (2) transcripts were then reviewed several times and statements that appeared essential or revealing of the phenomenon were identified (Van Manen, 1990); (3) each significant statement was assigned an interpretive statement or comment that was closely related to the data and which could help classify the transcripts; (4) with each addition of new interpretive comments, transcripts were again reviewed and eventually an exhaustive list of all possible interpretive comments was compiled; (5) from the composite list, interpretive comments that were highly interrelated were clustered into themes that alluded to meaningful aspects of the phenomenon; (6) for each theme, transcripts were further examined in search of further definition and delineation of the meaning of the theme and women’s statements in which strong instances of the theme were identified; (7) themes were then tied together in a common interpretive account of the phenomenon; and (8) in the final interview, the common interpretive account was shared with each woman and they were asked: “Is this what the experience is really like?” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 99).

After the final interview, participants’ feedback and comments were integrated into the composite interpretive account. While the point is never reached where new material can no longer enrich data analysis (Van Manen, 1990), toward the end of the analysis there were few important phenomenon that significantly extended, deepened, or qualified the various thematic components of the composite interpretive account (Weiss, 1994). The experience of each treasure discussed by the women was subsumed by at least three, if not all, of the following four sub themes. Therefore, the following common interpretive account and four sub themes capture the similarity, dissimilarity, and thus the breadth of women’s experience of their cherished personal possessions.

Common Interpretive Account: Nurturing Self

The common, overarching interpretive account of women’s experience of their cherished personal possessions is one of *nurturing self*. Through their cherished personal possessions, women nurture self through connecting with others, affirming personal experience, supporting themselves through change, and cultivating a sense of self. Although these results are presented thematically, within the interpretive phenomenological research tradition “themes” are not static, mutually exclusive meaning categories; rather, they are more like knots in the web of human experience (Van Manen, 1990) chosen to illuminate particularly meaningful and telling aspects of women’s experience of their treasures.

The women gathered and shared their experience with a variety of cherished possessions (e.g., jewelry, spiritual objects, photographs, books). The worth, or value, of their treasures was consistently based on how they felt about them, rather than on the objects’ physical or utilitarian qualities. All of the cherished possessions discussed were considered irreplaceable, represented an emotional investment of self, and were imbued with personal

meaning. The quality of the women's attachment to their cherished items was remarkably visceral and immediate and evoked a being-there-again sensation of deeply experiencing the personal significance of the item during the interviews. Without prompting, a range of emotion associated with their treasures surfaced and they were able to access the sights, sounds, textures, time, and place associated with their treasures. Cherished possessions functioned as talismans of women's life stories and appeared to be a way of silently honoring significant aspects of their past, current, and future selves. For example, a 42-year-old woman commented on this aspect of her experience of her treasures:

I can have that little mountain in my backpack or, you know, my necklace, or my ring from my grandmother, or whatever it is, and I'm the only person who knows about what it means to me, unless I choose to share it with someone ... they are things that I have, like honoring their value to me is a way of honoring my own growth and my own self.

The meanings associated with the women's treasures were also non-transferable to others and highly multidimensional, multilevel, and often complex. There was also a dynamic quality to the meaning of the women's treasures; as the women changed over time, so did the meanings associated with their cherished possessions. These women did not emphasize the utilitarian and economic meanings of their treasures, as did Dittmar's (1991) unemployed participants and Redfoot and Black's (1988) working and lower class women, even though several of these women were in the midst of coping with various life changing, and often challenging circumstances that often impacted their sense of economic security (e.g., impending geographical relocation, divorce, transition into the paid work force). In fact, these women experienced their treasures in a way similar to Hill's (1991) group of homeless women. Instead of typical consumer products, the women in Hill's study valued "sacred items," which represented memories of happier times, important relationships, morals, values, and religious beliefs (e.g., religious medals, pictures of children who were separated from them, items associated with previous jobs or skills, and items that symbolized their desire to improve their lives). However, the meanings that the women in this study attributed to their treasures were also similar to Dittmar's (1991) business commuters, representing a higher socioeconomic strata, who emphasized possessions as unique symbols of their personal history and self-development, and Redfoot and Black's (1988) middle class women, who tended to emphasize items that had rich biographical meanings. However, like the unemployed participants (Dittmar, 1991), the women in this study also emphasized the mood-adjusting features of their possessions, particularly as they pertained to supporting themselves through times of personal challenge.

Connecting with Others

Women experienced their treasures as "connectors" to others in a variety of ways. The meanings associated with their treasures often related to the women's sense of self through time, a historical and continuous sense of self. They described using their treasures as connectors to their ancestral or familial heritage, and as a way to leave a personal legacy of themselves for significant others. Also, through their cherished personal possessions, vivid memories of events from various times or phases in their lives—and the people associated with them—were brought to the surface in the form of a remembrance of their personal life journeys. One young woman commented on how all of her treasures have a story. About her necklace from her grandmother, she shared:

I think that she knew she was going to die ... so, anyway, that summer when she was starting to give away all her things she gave me this, this necklace, which is really something I would never wear, but she told me the story behind it ... you're getting my whole genealogy here ... so her husband, they were, he fought in the war...

Referring to her cherished ring, inherited from her mother, a 59-year-old woman spoke of the power that her treasure had in bringing her past experiences into present time:

I take that little case out [which contains the ring] and I show it to my granddaughter ... and, sometimes I even wear it for a day, and while I have it on I do remember different things ... it just brings back memories, it's like the circle of life to me ... the ring is a bond between my mom and dad, it's a bond with all my sisters and brothers, uh, it's the ring of our life when we were all young ... it reminds me of all the years I went through as a young girl, and what my mom went through having eight children, so I want to give it to my granddaughter.

The women described a sense of community, or living with others, evoked by their cherished personal possessions. About her cherished travel journal which contains literary works created by herself, travel companions, friends from home, and long-deceased writers of influence, this 39-year old woman said: "This is one way of creating roots, not with my own life, but at least with a larger family of humanity."

All the women experienced their cherished possessions as strong "connectors" to supportive, significant, and influential others. Cherished others included family members and friends who were regarded as mentors and models of strength, courage, and perseverance. Cherishing items associated with these people seemed to be a way of honoring their importance in the lives of these women. For example, this woman commented on the importance of a book she received from a close friend, a "soul mate," at a vulnerable time in her life:

It was really awful parting at the end of my marriage, I was married to someone who was very abusive, so, for anyone who has ever been through that, you don't know who, who are still your friends and who are not your friends ... so, receiving the book from her, the whole book is beautiful, but this one poem in particular, I must have cried all afternoon because she was letting me know, specifically through this poem, that she was my friend still, and that she did not want to lose contact, and that was so critical to me then because I really lost a lot of people...

Finally, the women often used their cherished possessions as substitutes for cherished others who were either temporarily absent or deceased. A woman who lost her father to a fatal chronic illness when she was young recounted this experience from her adult perspective. Regarding a cherished photograph of her father, she shared: "It's the way I have of having him with me ... [tears] ... 'cause he's not here."

Affirming Personal Experience

Women's cherished items were invariably about experience; specifically, their experience as women. The women cherished items associated with particular experiences as a way of personally marking various achievements, contributions, passages, and particularly

poignant recollections of childhood. One 42-year old woman passionately shared the importance of her university degree. The meaning of her degree centers on the process of attaining her educational goal. Thoughts of her degree and the process it represents brought her a sense of joy, accomplishment, and pride in herself, as well as a sense of relief that she has completed a difficult phase of her personal journey. She also considered her degree as objective proof, a public acknowledgement, of her accomplishment, although she felt that what counted the most had already been internalized. She shared:

I got a degree, really important ... I started in '82 and, um, took it at night school. I took my first year in night school and then became fulltime, and my marriage broke up in the meantime and all sorts of other things happened, but, um, I was basically told I couldn't stick through a university degree ... I can look back on the educational process and see how I've grown and that sort of thing, and what I have done and what it has meant to me ... it's a multifaceted thing, it's a piece of paper and it's a "I told you so! I knew I could do it! I did it myself, right!? I wrote all the papers! I wrote all the exams! It was entirely my effort and my brain that did it!"

Another 59-year old woman considered her photos of her three sons as cherished possessions. For her, these photos served as symbols of an intense commitment she had to parenting and were associated with a deep sense of pride and love. Reflecting on the meaning of her photos, her children, and her role as a mother, she shared:

I woke up thinking about them, you go to bed thinking about them, you dream of them, you know ... I was with them 24 hours a day ... my entire life was for them, and then when you see them all grow and gone, it takes a long time to, to uh, to fill in that gap ... this is what my life was about, this is what I did ...

This woman reflected on the effort she put into collecting cherished photographs: "Maybe I'm doing it for me, maybe I'm not doing it for them, maybe I'm doing it for me in trying to remember and try to say this is what happened in every stage of my life ..."

Another 42-year old woman, after having to quickly leave her home community and new position in the public service due to the break-up of her abusive marriage, received a beautiful prism-crystal mountain ornament, chosen by her "closest friend" and given to her as a gift on behalf of her colleagues. This cherished item represented many things to her, but she commented at length on the value this possession held for her in terms of validating her professional contribution and what it meant in terms of her beliefs about her own ability, she stated:

To me, when I look at it, it's about me doing it again, you know, it's like, because of the strength that I feel from that, and the kind of affirmation that those people gave me about what I can do in, with my head, not like my hands, like not being a mom and not taking care of everybody else, but being able to push myself intellectually, that was a job that I did that in and I was respected for it, so they gave me more than an affirmation as a colleague or as a friend, they gave me an affirmation of my belief that I am intelligent enough to be able to do it ...

Cherished items were often symbolic of life cycle, relational, and personal passages. A 27-year old woman cherished a St. Christopher necklace; although she has had the necklace since she was an infant, she shared:

I put it on, um, sometime in junior high, like grade seven or something ... it corresponded roughly to the time when I started menstruating ... it was a big symbolic moment in my life ... I have worn this every day, I rarely take it off.

Finally, on several occasions, women spoke of the power of their cherished items to bring to the fore memories of their childhoods. Such recollections were not always experienced as positive and happy, but the women spoke of the importance of not forgetting who they once were and what they had experienced as children. Such recollections of childhood provided impetus and guidance for their futures in terms of lessons learned for personal growth and development. One woman talked at length about the meaning and significance of a single cherished earring, most notably her childhood experience of the absence of her father and the traumatic bond she experienced with her mother. Her earring figuratively contained her painful memories of experience, which “would fill fifty books;” it functioned as a silent reminder of a painful familial legacy that she wished not to repeat. Reflecting on her experience of her lone earring, she shared:

I look back as an adult now, and I think, how sad that that little girl had to hold on to that earring because her mom couldn't work out something with her dad, and a father, who is not the best father, uh, didn't fight hard enough for that little person, and there was four little persons, and I think when we have our own children, that little earring will be a reminder of, no matter what, together or not, [we are always together].

Supporting Self through Change

Although some of the women commented on the simple aesthetic, visual, and tactile pleasure they derived from their cherished possessions, the majority of them spoke of the role their items played during times of challenge and change. Cherished items provided a source of comfort, security, and even an avenue of escape at times of personal difficulty. In this sense, their treasures seemed to function much like “transitional objects” (Winnicott, 1953) during times of personal stress. Regarding an old ring, associated with her maternal grandmother who lived as and represented a model of strength, this 42-year old woman stated:

Days when I feel like I need all the strength around me, and all the support around me, and all the reminders around me that I'm okay, that's the days I wear it ... it's like a power, it's like an internal sense of warmth and strength that comes from it.

For some women, cherished items also seemed to facilitate the process of centering the self during difficult times. In this context, “centering the self” meant getting back in-touch with, or grounding, the self in times of change or challenge. Walker (1990) considered centering to be a form of inner readjustment and a way of “calling one's perceptions and powers back into their home within the self, where they can be used to enhance personal creative thoughts and responses” (p. 18). The women frequently used their cherished items to facilitate focusing on sources of strength within themselves and their lives. Their items served to facilitate the experiencing of a range of affect, and often had a spiritual or meditative function. For example, a 42-year old woman, dealing with the after effects of the break-up of her marriage, raising three children on her own, and working for pay while furthering her education, made a daily

ritual of reading a beautiful affirmation-type poem as a strategy of self-support through a trying time in her life:

It's on the mirror in my bedroom on my dresser, so, every morning when I get up and as soon as I look in the mirror, I read it ... it's wonderful, it's like a way to acknowledge all my feelings, it's a way to acknowledge sadness, it's a way to acknowledge the things that I don't feel so good about that happened to me in my life, and also a way to acknowledge where I'm going ... no matter what's going on, it's like a way I can center myself again, when I read it, so I read it more than once a day, some days, when I'm having a day that's full of conflict with my children and, or other things, or lots of stresses, or when I start to really question myself about whether I'm doing the right thing going to school and taking care of myself in this way ... it just puts the doubts away.

Finally, some women found value in using their cherished items to facilitate their sharing of their life stories in self-directed and empowering ways. For example, a young woman talked passionately about the special bond she had with her pet dog. After her pet's sudden, unexpected death, she wore her dog's cherished tags as a tribute to him, but also as a way to facilitate her bereavement. She shared: "It's sort of symbolic that after he passed away, I put them on... I just put his dog tags on, and all the people could ask me, 'what are those?' and I could tell them [about him]."

Cultivating a Sense of Self

To cultivate a sense of self means to develop or improve (Oxford Dictionaries, 2009) one's sense of self. Through their cherished possessions, women create and support an image of self, maintain focus on what matters to them in their lives, and facilitate the continued development of self through the process of considering the meanings of their cherished items. All of the women commented that their cherished items helped them to portray positive and healthy images of themselves. About the possessions she considered cherished, one woman shared:

These things are symbols of the best connections that there are! I don't keep things that bring back memories of something that was ugly or painful, you know, I don't keep those things, so the things that I do treasure are the things that are about positive things and about special people ... so all of these things are happy things.

Often times, cherished items served as sources of inspiration and provided a window into women's guiding values and priorities. One woman referred to her cherished "friendship pin" as representing a core motivational principle in her life: "To cherish your friends and treat them as life long, as opposed to people who treat [friends] for the moment... it is just a piece of jewelry; however, what it symbolizes in friendship for me is a lifetime of, I guess, treating people well."

Conversations with women about their cherished personal possessions naturally and inevitably flowed into conversations about their current life experiences and the various issues that they were dealing with; essentially, these conversations were about their developing sense of self. Upon reflecting on her collection of cherished possessions, one woman shared:

I have never realized this before, but my connection with my mother's family and my lack of connection to my father's family ... I never realized before we had this conversation how, how significant my mom's parents were to me, it's just really interesting, you learn something about yourself ... I never knew I had this void of having nothing from my father's side of the family, and when I think of all the possessions that I own, so many of them belong to my mother's father, in particular ... but, I never realized how much I was connected to it [maternal side of the family] ... so, maybe I'll have to make a little more effort to learn about my dad's side of the family ...

Discussion

An oral review of women's cherished possessions facilitates exploration of women's personal histories, significant life events, sources of meaning, and unresolved issues; essentially, such a review provides a window into the private and personal lives of women from their own frames of reference (Cotterill, 1992; Reinhartz, 1992).

Although the experience of collecting and reflecting on their treasures was often emotional and deeply personal, all of the women commented on their enjoyment of the process. Most of the women also commented on the new insights and understandings about themselves gained as a result of participating in the interviews. For example, one woman shared: "It gives you a sense of the way your life span has gone, kind of the different periods in your life, and things that have come from different periods, and that each one is important in itself, it's part of who you end up being."

For several women, the process of reflecting upon and discussing their experience of their cherished items had a significant positive, inspirational impact that influenced their behavior beyond the context of the research interview. These women commented on their motivation to align their behaviors with their beliefs, which they became more cognizant of as a result of the interview process. For example, one woman shared:

After telling you about [friend], just the need to see her I guess, and she came out ... just taking about her so much, and realizing verbally, not just mentally, what she means to me, saying it, made me want to see her again ... I say she's important to me ... what do I do to prove that she's that important to me? After I got to see her, it was just as I said, there were no changes, it was wonderful!

Another woman was enthusiastic about, and inspired by, the experience of collecting and discussing her treasures and shared:

It's like a celebration, it's wonderful, it's like a trip through my life again, to sit and talk with you about it, and to, I mean, I'm feeling very warm, and, like I have an energy. I'm gaining energy from talking to you about these things ... It's really good to do this, it's really good to put it together, you know, because I don't do that, I mean, I think about them, but I haven't ever done this! The energy is, it's like a way of counting my blessings ... talking to you about this makes me think about what really matters to me.

The findings of this study appear to support Belk's (1988) contention that possessions represent parts of the "extended self" (Belk, 1988). Women may have numerous possessions, but only a few may be considered "cherished." Such cherished possessions evoked richly textured webs of meaning for these women, and appeared to pertain to phenomenologically

important aspects of their concepts of self. Because these items represented important aspects of the self, cherishing them was experienced by these women as a way of nurturing their unique sense of self.

Women and Psychotherapy

The results of this study suggest the value of engaging women clients in conversations about their personal treasures. Collecting treasures for the interview necessitated a process of each woman closely examining what she considered cherished, and why. Through similar discussions in a psychotherapeutic context, therapists may help women of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds explore conceptions of self, sources of personal meaning, and potential unresolved issues. Ultimately, the process of discussing cherished personal possessions within the psychotherapeutic context leads back to the client as an experiencing, meaning-making being existing within a particular context or situation.

Early in the therapeutic relationship, an invitation to women to share their experience of their cherished possessions could serve to facilitate client engagement and rapport building. Discussion about personal treasures could also be employed as a way of managing impasses in the therapeutic process. When an impasse is reached, the client may be asked to stop and reflect on various sources of meaning contained in and represented by their personal treasures. Such discussions may facilitate client self-understanding of unresolved issues, re-establish or refine psychotherapeutic goals, or even consolidate learning. Finally, through such exploration, disturbing or troublesome meanings might emerge, thereby providing possibilities for further exploration in therapy.

Women's experience of their cherished personal possessions is one of nurturing the self. Women nurture themselves through their treasures by using them to connect with others, affirm personal experience, support themselves through change, and cultivate a sense of self. Encouraging women's use of cherished personal possessions as a means of self-understanding and, ultimately, self-nurturance may be the central objective for incorporating a discussion of cherished possessions as a psychotherapeutic strategy with women clients.

Connecting with Others. Currently, the research literature suggests that the meaning of women's cherished personal possessions has primarily to do with interpersonal integration and emotional attachment (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kamptner et al., 1989; Sherman, 1991), and less to do with style and utilitarian issues (Wapner et al., 1990), personal values and ideals, and the intrinsic value of the item (Dittmar, 1989; Sherman, 1991). Literature in the area of women's identity development also suggests that women's primary identity structure is relational in nature (Jordan et al., 1991; Kaplan, 1986; Miller, 1986). From this perspective, women develop increasing levels of complexity, structure, and articulation of the self within the context of human bonds and attachments. Enns (1991) contends that women's connections with others validate their capacities as relational beings, provide the foundation for personal concepts of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem, and are essential for well-being and continuing growth. Indeed, connecting with others was a prominent interpretive theme found in women's experience of their treasures. Hence, the results of this study further support the notion that women's core identity structure is one of relationships to, or connections with, others. Personal treasures connect women to their familial heritage and ancestry, may be used as a way to pass something important of themselves to younger generations, and serve as reminders that they are embedded within a context of others' lives.

Women use their treasures as a means of connecting with others. Therefore, a therapist may facilitate a discussion of a client's cherished possessions to gain information about the quality of the relationships in her life. Avenues of exploration may include: which "others" are represented through her treasures? Why are these "others" represented? What impact do such

associations have for her concept of self? Are the “others” represented by her treasures supportive or unsupportive to her concept and experience of self? It may be important to encourage women to focus on positive connections with others that are represented through their treasures. For example, several of the women in this study commented on the associations that their treasures had with significant others who often functioned as role models or mentors. For women negotiating challenging life paths, which are not always supported by the social context in which they live, cherishing items containing inspiring meanings may have an important supportive effect.

Affirming Personal Experience. Women’s experiences have not been well represented in traditional psychological theory and research (Gilbert, 1992). However, women have always had their own stories to tell, despite this lack of social validation. Cherishing particular items is one means by which women may, at least privately, acknowledge and affirm their own experiences. Kaschak (1992) contends that “feminist psychotherapy works toward helping women remember forgotten experiences and making invisible meanings visible” (p. 211). Through encouraging the use of personal treasures as a means of nurturing important aspects of self, women may be able to reevaluate, reclaim, and reaffirm (Kaschak, 1992) important aspects of their life experience that relate to their evolving concepts of themselves. Finally, encouraging the use of cherished possessions as markers of significant accomplishments and life passages would be a way for clients to affirm, and thus nurture, their evolving concepts of self.

Supporting Self through Change. Because of their deeply personal nature, cherished possessions can be considered, touched, cared for, and shared with others as women’s sense of readiness dictates. These treasures help women through challenging times by functioning as sources of comfort and security, and as gentle reminders to their owners that they are worth caring for. Hence, women may use their treasures much in the same way that children use teddy bears or blankets as sources of comfort in times of need (Wapner et al., 1990; Winnicott, 1953). For many women in this study, their treasures contained positive, self-enhancing meanings. Because of this, they often accessed them at times when their sense of self was somehow challenged, perhaps as a result of a life-changing situation, such as experiencing a divorce or going back to school. Perhaps encouraging women to connect with a cherished object that holds self-supporting, self-nurturing connotations may be a way of helping them to restore and maintain their sense of self through times of challenge and change (Hill, 1991).

Cultivating a Sense of Self. The findings of this study seem to support the notion that women are actively involved in cultivating a world of meaning, which both reflects and helps create the ultimate goals of their existence (Csikszentmihaly & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). In fact, one of the central findings of this study is that women experience their treasures as a way of cultivating a sense of self. Through their cherished possessions, women represent an image of the self; maintain focus on central values, priorities, and life ambitions; and clarify various developmental “growing edges” and unresolved psychological issues. Through their cherished possessions, women afford themselves a means of privately honoring particularly important aspects of themselves and their experience, thereby nurturing their conceptions of self. In this way, they experience a sense of personal influence over shaping the meaning of their own lives and use their cherished possessions as markers or symbols of such meanings.

Women’s cherished possessions have to do with particularly valued aspects of their sense of self, but they also represent a means by which women actively engage in a process of cultivating a meaningful sense of self. The power of personal possessions as a means of nurturing one’s concepts of self appears to be the “motivational force” (Furby, 1991) behind women’s experience of their cherished possessions. However, the power of treasures to nurture the self does not reside in the items themselves; rather, it resides in the experience the women

have in relation to their treasures. It is the women themselves who ultimately determine which possessions are cherished and why.

Cherished possessions and the meanings that they contain appear to function as “referents” (Myers, 1985) to the development and maintenance of women’s self-concepts (Kamptner et al., 1989; Myers, 1985). These women reported their experiences of their treasures to be remarkably positive, self-supporting, and even growth promoting (Myers, 1985). It is possible, perhaps probable, that the items these women chose to discuss are heavily biased (Belk, 1991b) in their power to portray a preferred or desired version of the self. However, it is this very characteristic of women’s experience of their cherished personal possessions which renders it self-nurturing. Through the process of sharing the meaning of their treasures, women become aware of how their treasures are connected to their developing conceptions of self. At other times, these treasures help women to focus on what their personal missions in life might be; they help women to be the people they are striving to be and therefore may serve as tangible sources of inspiration during times of personal and cultural challenge.

The participants in this study were from a relatively homogenous demographic group. Interviewing women from other backgrounds and marginalized circumstances about the meaning of their cherished possessions (e.g., Aboriginal, immigrant, refugee, and homeless women) might provide new avenues for cross cultural understanding and ways of supporting such women through difficult times of loss, change, and adjustment.

Conclusion

The overriding goal of conducting an interpretive phenomenological study of women’s experience of their cherished personal possessions was to achieve greater depth of understanding of this phenomenon, so that ultimately both research and practice may be better informed (Benner, 1985; Osborne, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Although exploring a client’s experience of their cherished personal possessions in therapy holds intuitive appeal and some possibilities for understanding women’s experience have been identified herein, to date there has been no systematic study of this form of intervention. Continued conversations with women about the meaning of their treasures and careful examination of the use of cherished personal possessions in psychotherapeutic contexts with diverse populations may further refine our understanding of the experience and implications of the relationship women have with their treasures.

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