

Eugene Halton's Original Theory of the Extended Self Versus Russell Belk's Use of It

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Notes on and excerpted quotations from Eugene Halton's theory of the self (and mind) as continuous with and involved in its objective surroundings as extensions of the self

These notes provide evidence for my multiple works as the earlier basis for what Russell Belk later called "the extended self" in 1988, for which he got credit while my original ideas were marginalized or excluded.

In addition, I also developed in some of these ideas as "critical animism" (see below), a predecessor to what is now termed, "the new animism."

"I learned that things can embody self. We create environments that are extensions of our selves; that serve to tell us who we are, and act as role models for what we can become." Eugene Halton, quoted in Joan Kron, *Home Psych*, 1983, p. 52.

Russell Belk, 1988, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research*

Here in this quotation from Belk's initial article he claims on p. 140 that my statement that selves extend "literally into the objective surroundings" only "comes close" to the term he is using. He claims my use does not include persons, places and group possessions..." Yet in my article that he is citing I actually do include them (see my excerpts from my 1984 article further down):

Belk: "The term extended self has not been applied previously to the conception of self-plus-possessions, but Rochberg-Halton (1984, p. 335) comes close: "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."

One difference in the present view is that the extended self is seen not to be limited to external objects and personal possessions, but also includes persons, places, and group possessions as well as such possessions as body parts and vital organs."

In his 1988 article, "Possessions and the Extended Self," Russell Belk cites my work numerous times, far more than any other research, including Rochberg-Halton six times, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's, *The Meaning of Things* (1981), nine times, and in addition a related paper by Csikszentmihalyi one time. He quotes me at the beginning of his discussion of the term "extended self" (see above) from the abstract of my 1984 article (which was revised and published in *Meaning and Modernity*, 1986) saying it "comes close" to the term extended self, though not saying that the theory is mine. He claims mistakenly that my theory does not include "persons, places, and group possessions," ignoring how I repeatedly describe how persons and things act as signs and as "role models," and as both external to and internalized in, the self, and also how my work indeed addresses "persons, places, and

group possessions.” My chapter “The City as Living Memory” in my book *Meaning and Modernity*, explicitly addresses all three categories, as does the chapter in *The Meaning of Things* titled “The Home as Symbolic Environment,” and as some of my other work which preceded his 1988 article.

And in his 2013 update “Extended Self in a Digital World,” Belk mentions Csikszentmihalyi’s name as a source for the idea, but no reference to the book I coauthored with Csikszentmihalyi, and no mention of my name, including the 1984 article he cited in 1988. Belk created, in effect, a brand name for my ideas, and has marketed it well, assuming possession of my theory through his term over time without crediting my originary ideas. He also read and wrote the blurb for my book, *The Great Brain Suck*, describing it as “a wholly original book.”

I have collected here a number of quotations from my work written before Belk’s 1988 article to illustrate how I had developed an encompassing theory of the self as “extended” into its environment. I also found the term “extend” too narrow, in implying a moving outward of the self, extensionally, rather than also allowing that the self inherently involves its meaningful environment and habitat, inwardly as well as outwardly. That also is why I emphasized the idea of “transaction,” using especially Dewey’s idea that it is a genuine triadic relationship rooted in a communicative situation.

From Eugene Rochberg-Halton, 1979, “The Meaning of Personal Art Objects,” 176-177. In *Social Research and Cultural Policy*. Edited by J. Zuzanek. Ontario: Otium Publications, 166-181.

“The importance of artistic objects as signs is that they embody the attitudes of that extended sense of community which is culture. As Dewey and Mead have each stressed, it is in taking on the roles of the community in our experience that we become and develop as selves. Artistic objects, like all of one’s personal possessions, represent internalized attitudes of the community to us in our everyday environment. In this sense our interaction with our belongings is a sort of ‘conversation,’ mediated by all those sociocultural sign-habits which form the ‘language’ of this conversation. Our possessions, including artistic objects, thus exist for us in the context of larger social relations. Art can be distinguished from the rest of cherished possessions by the fact that its communicative significance is evoked usually by the qualities of the object itself, and not only by social referents external to the object. As I mentioned earlier, artistic objects are most often used only to reflect personal identity, ties to kin, status, and so forth, but even these uses of art for purposes of ‘recognition’ can serve to unify and express the meaning of one’s experiences.

From the aesthetic perspective, however, artistic objects should have a *purpose of their own*...it is possible to value an original Picasso, as at least one of the respondents did, not as art but as some kind of social token. By doing this, personal needs of the respondent may be realized, but the ‘purpose’ of the object itself seems to be denied. **An aesthetic experience thus involves something more than the projection or emanation of meaning from the person to the environment or vice versa. It involves a realization of inherent qualities through interaction of the person with the objective qualities of the object. Thus the purpose of artistic objects, in order to be valued as artistic objects, is to provide expression of human feeling and ideas, and to project creative ideals through their own expressive qualities.** There is no real reason, other than convention, why a home should simply contain works of art, but there is every reason why aesthetic experiences should form an intrinsic aspect of domestic living, and art is both a template and medium for the realization of these experiences.

....Too often a behavioral pattern is extracted from the whole without any thought of its context, and this single pattern is used to explain the value of that event, e.g., attendance patterns. This is methodological ‘recognition,’ in which the intrinsic features of the object of study, culture itself, are denied. If, as the present study suggests, people orient themselves to their environment through a world of signs and symbols, then it seems to me that, if we are to study ‘culture,’ social scientists should return to

questions of how objects and activities are imbued with meaning and reflect personal or institutional purposes and aims.

Eugene Rochberg-Halton. "Life in the Treehouse: Pet Therapy and Family Metaphor as Self-Dialogue." *Pets and the Family*. New York: Haworth Press, 1985.

Belk also cites this work in his original extended self article. In it I say:

"the essence of the self consists in its communicative relationship with its inner and outer environment, a relationship that includes real external social objects as well as their representation in mind.

In a study of the meaning of household possessions involving three generation families in Chicago, (Rochberg-Halton, 1979a, b; 1984; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981) it became clear that the things people select out of the domestic environment and endow with special value act as external signs of the self." P. 176-177.

"The self grows through a progressive internalization of empathic, gestural, and verbal dialogues it has with its surroundings, and for this reason the foundation of the self should be seen as social self-dialogue, rather than, as the Freudian view holds, an asocial reactor core of libido." P 177.

"Just as a television set can serve as a surrogate for personal communication, so too can a pet. And, as I have tried to show, a pet can further serve as a temporary therapeutic symbol through which to work out family problems that can then be redirected within the family context itself. Through the self-dialogues it makes possible, one can externalize one's emotions and thoughts about problems to reflect on and resolve them." P. 189.

***Meaning and Modernity* 1986**

p. 137 from **Ch. 6: "Culture Considered as Cultivation."**

"...artifacts can serve as a medium for socialization and self-expression, and hence transactions with one's cherished possessions, either actually or symbolically, can be seen as sign expressions of the self. The person, as a complex of living, feeling, sign-habits, extends into and derives from the spatiotemporal environment through signs." (p. 137).

Object Relations, Role Models, and Cultivation, 1984 article, later published as Chapter 7 of my book, *Meaning and Modernity*.

From the 1984 journal version, Abstract: "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."

And from the version I later published in my book *Meaning and Modernity*, 1986, with those page numbers):

148 **person or thing** can act as role model

"The inherent subjectivism of the Freudian tradition is criticized through an examination of the role of personal possessions in the objectification of the self; that is, we will see how material objects serve as important signs of the process of *cultivation*, and how they *literally* act as role models to reveal goals and values, and serve as means to realize those aims. I hope to show how Freudian object-relations theory undervalues the external environment through a misconceived understanding of the reflex arc concept, and how the pragmatic understanding of the reflex arc and the internalization of role models provides a

corrective that includes external things as real signs of the self.”

- 149 “A hero or parent can symbolize through their actions how one should behave or not behave. An inanimate book can also impart similar information through the signs it conveys....”
- 150 “...just as there are ‘personified role models, there can be ‘objectified’ role models. The importance of a role model in Mead’s perspective lies in its *representativeness as a sign*, and an inanimate doll can symbolize the role of mother or father to a child just as an animate person can ...In other words, objects can *objectify* the self.”
- 153 “From the Deweyan point of view it is more accurate to give the psychic component of ‘psychic energy’ its full due and to see it as arising in the context of the environmentally situated interpretive act—which Dewey called ‘organic coordination’ and much later in his philosophy ‘transactions’...what Peirce termed ‘the sign’... what Mead characterized as ‘the act’...and what I have designated as ‘cultivation.’”
- 154 “The meaning of the self is to be found in its contributions to the community of discourse, both externalized and internalized...”
- “In the views of Cooley, James mark Baldwin, Dewey, Mead, and others in the American social psychological tradition, the essence of the self consists in a communicative relationship with its object, a relationship that includes the real social object as well as its representation in mind. The self grows through a progressive internalization of the empathic, gestural, and verbal dialogues it carries on with its surroundings, and for this reason the foundation of the self is seen as a social self-dialogue...”
- 155 “It must be stressed that artifacts in a certain sense do have a ‘purpose’ of their own. Objects have a definite character or inherent quality that will have an influence on the possessor and that is realized through the transaction of person and thing. And as Marx pointed out, we do in fact invest external things with psychic energy through our labor. The product of our labor is the external representation of that labor, whether it be our professional work, a shelf that we make at home, or a plant that we tend. Through our transactions with these things we cultivate the self, and these things are representations of the self, just as the words one utters or the thoughts and emotions one has are representations of the self. Transactions with cherished possessions are communicative dialogues with ourselves...In this sense the home is a sign-practice, a craft to be cultivated. It forms an important part of both the individual and family self, as well as representing the wider culture.”
- 158 “...with age in adulthood, memories evoked by belongings become the dominant meaning, and significant other people become increasingly associated with one’s possessions, suggesting widening boundaries of self.”
- “Hence the meanings of the things one values are not limited to the individual object itself but also include the spatial context in which the object is placed, forming a domain of personal territoriality. In other words the background context or gestalt of the thing also communicates something, and the results show how different rooms in the household reveal different conceptions of self.”
- 167 “Even before the infant is born its parents have begun to project an environment of clothing, toys, and furnishings that will begin the socialization process. The self arises in a milieu that is constantly ‘addressing’ it, telling it who it is through its surroundings, telling it how to become he or she. Transactions with one’s cherished possessions, either actually or symbolically, can thus be seen as sign-expressions of the self. The person, as a complex of living, feeling, sign-habits, does not stop with his or her physical organism but quite literally is in continuous transaction with the broader spatiotemporal environment through signs.

Chapter 8: Remembrance of Things Present

- 169 “Valued belongings are means through which to objectify the self, to create an external extension of personal identity, a tangible presence in one’s surroundings.”
- 171 “Perhaps animism is not as primitive and obsolete a belief as the modern consciousness has claimed, once we realize that one’s relationship to valued surroundings is an *animism of signs*. The portrait is a family icon, a veritable ancestor totem, which lives in the remembrance of the generations who receive and come to cherish it, and in turn transmit it to their descendents. Hence when the mother says, ‘It’s part of the continuity of who I am, where I come from, where I’m going,’ she is correct not only figuratively, but ontologically as well. The portrait forms an essential element of those habits of conduct in which her self consists: it is a direct physical link with preceding family members, with her individual sense of identity, with what she will become individually, and what her family will become collectively. It is both a socializing sign and sign-expression of her self, just as other feelings, experiences, memories, and thoughts that shape her self are.”
- 185 “In this sense the view I am proposing might be termed *critical animism*. Animism has traditionally referred to the belief that certain animals, plants, or inanimate things such as ritual objects, are actually spirits, and as such should be treated as autonomous personalities. Animism is a view rather antithetical to anyone brought up in the modern Western tradition who believes that thought and things are radically different substances. Now I am not suggesting that we should believe in fairies and leprechauns, but what I am proposing is that objects are not merely inert matter but are living signs whose meanings are realized in the transactions we have with them and that need to be critically cultivated in the context of the consciousness they bring about. This critical animism of signs means that all three elements of the transaction—person, thing, and what the thing represents—are intrinsically involved in its meaning. In other words, against the idea that meaning is a disembodied conceptual entity located in a brain, cultural system, or ‘deep structure,’ it is more accurate to view meaning as including the sign-objects through which representation occurs.”
- 185 [stuffed dog example] “This inanimate dog is clearly an *animate sign*, an external object, which, by being endowed with qualities of personhood, makes possible a self-dialogue in which this girl can communicate her own feelings to herself through an external means. Just as we develop internal habits for dealing with problems, this dog is a kind of external habit for this girl, a readily available means of coping with problems in a safe way, one in which she has control.”

Chapter 9: “The City as Living Memory”

- 191 “The metropolitan environment, from this semiotic perspective, is a living sign-practice transcending the present moment and objectively situated in the minds and hearts of its inhabitants as well as forming an external dimension of their minds and hearts. The city is itself a public possession, but one which should also simultaneously possess its inhabitants by endowing them with the energy, communicative forms, and opportunities for participating in the larger drama of urban life.”

From *The Meaning of Things*, 1981

Of all the things that people use and surround themselves with, our study will concentrate primarily on those objects they keep in their homes. This limitation will exclude many things that are important in defining the self, such as tools of the trade, cars, and those things that people encounter and use in the

public spaces of life. But one can argue that the home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of the person, and therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity. The objects of the household represent, at least potentially, the endogenous being of the owner.” P. 17.

“In Mead’s view, through assuming the role of the group or community, an individual’s conduct becomes influenced and guided by social rules and norms. Unfortunately, Mead’s original meaning of the term ‘role model’ has become narrowed, so that now social scientists tend to emphasize the behavioral patterns of an actual person as constituting a ‘role model,’ leaving out or omitting the fact that Mead includes ‘any object’ or ‘set of objects’ as having this power as well. The importance of a role model lies in its representativeness as a sign.” P. 81. (This is also verbatim from Rochberg–Halton, *Cultural Signs and Urban Adaptation: The Meaning of Cherished Household Possessions*. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1979, p7).

My words continue: “Thus cherished possessions in the home evoke a whole range of sign-habits or meanings, and in this way continually reflect the internalized attitudes of the community—or what Mead calls ‘the generalized other’—through which the social self develops: they are repositories of personal memories, they embody kinship ties, they tell us who we are and who we might become.” They provide a means of objectifying experiences, relationships, and values in concrete material form.”

p. 155 in section “Choice of Role Models”

“It is commonly assumed in theories of socialization that people become acculturated to their society in part by selecting to pay attention to certain ‘significant others’ whose behavior and values they internalize. These significant others become role models and transmit the goals of a culture from generation to generation. If the goals of a culture can be ‘objectified’ in its artifacts, they can also be personified in those individuals whom we admire.”

“When an object is imbued with qualities of the self, it expresses the being of that person, whether in written words or a chair that was crafted or a photograph. It becomes an objectified form of consciousness no less than words spoken into someone’s ear, all forming parts of the social self. Through these objects a part of the self comes to be embodied in the consciousness of others and will continue to exist long after the consciousness that molded them has ceased to exist. Perhaps the clearest example is when a number of people gather together to mourn for someone at a wake or a funeral. These people—family, kin, and friends of the departed person—are the living representation of the deceased. Although the personal self has ceased to exist, the social self has a continued existence in those who will remember and through those artifacts that in whatever way give testimony to that person. Pp. 190-191.

[There are more quotations in book, but I have not yet excerpted them here].

Further notes to develop:

Belk, p. 152: “Maintaining Multiple Levels of Self”

cf. Halton’s 3 levels of self in *The Meaning of Things*, discussed as, “The Three levels of Representation,” pp. 38-45; and “The Personal, the Social, and the Cosmic Self,” pp. 189-191. and *Meaning and Modernity*, p. 137-142

Belk 155 “Money and Extension of Self.” Compare chapter 10 in *Meaning and Modernity* titled “Money

is No Object.”