

# THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF MATERIAL POSSESSIONS: TO HAVE IS TO BE

Helga Dittmar

*New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992*

## TO HAVE POSSESSIONS: A HANDBOOK ON OWNERSHIP AND PROPERTY

Floyd Rudmin

*Corte Madera, CA: Select Press, 1991*

Among the most intriguing areas of inquiry beckoning macromarketing researchers into its hall of mirrors is the dynamic, mutually constituting relationship among self, society, and stuff. Description and analysis of this metaphysical construction project are being undertaken in contiguous disciplines contributing to our enterprise. Understanding the psychosociality of objects—I have taken to calling this phenomenon “materiality,” to distinguish it from the ideological baggage attached to the polyvocal construct of materialism—provides scholars with a fundamental opportunity for collaborative, synthetic research. Predictably enough, work diffusing into consumer research has had a principally psychological cast, but it is acquiring greater sociological shading as the field of consumer object relations matures. Just such a shading is evident in two recently published books treating possession.

While the volume by Dittmar may appeal to a general readership in social psychology, it will likely as not disappoint scholars in marketing and consumer research. The author, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Sussex, seeks to present an overview of the psychology of people's relationship with possessions and to explore the implications of a social constructionist approach, in particular for the issue of identity. The result is a very uneven treatment of an intrinsically interesting phenomenon. The central conceit of the book—to have is to be—is positioned as an impoverished, underdetermined notion, whose ostensible neglect by theoreticians becomes an annoyingly repetitive lament. That material goods are used as a symbolic means of defining self and social world is rehearsed to distraction through a combination of literature citation that runs more to listing than to integration and episodic recount-

ing of the author's own empirical essays. The volume culminates in the commonplace that identity is culture bound, and its relationship to material social reality is ambiguous, ideological, and implicitly articulated. The author concludes by regretting that a thorough examination of this relationship is essentially beyond the scope of her book. The effort exerted by the reader to travel a well-worn path is not repaid by arrival at such a mundane destination. Neither is the weary admonition that the pervasiveness of material social reality is in need of broad interdisciplinary investigation sufficient consolation.

The author begins with a disclaimer that macromarketers may find curious. She explicitly divorces her analysis of materialism from endorsement of Western capitalism but fails to explore the fascinating dynamics prompting such disavowal. The book moves from sociobiological through individual-centered to social constructionist accounts of identity development, examining the role of possessions in each of these formulations. The author builds her case by reviewing literature from European sources that may be a delightful discovery for North American macromarketers, and from a maddeningly unsystematic pool of North American marketing and consumer research sources that may frustrate Europeans.

Sociobiology is given relatively short shrift, its implications presumed to be less interesting than other approaches, and its orientation trained on the allegedly unsolvable. This dismissal is unfortunate, given work by cultural ecologists and cultural materialists as well as by social psychologists (Cialdini goes uncited) that probe parallel issues in persuasive and provocative style. The individual-centered approach is reduced to an uncritical and derivative discussion of possessions as part of the extended self. A useful summary of the social constructionism literature is provided, but the author unaccountably excludes Prus's body of work from her discussion of symbolic interactionism. Similarly, her treatment of topics such as gift giving and collecting as expressions of symbolic identity is far too underdeveloped. Gender issues are also slighted, despite their efflorescence in North American consumer research. For example, ACR gender conference proceedings are not consulted. In proposing a simplistic model of the meanings of possessions for identity that is inherently semiotic, she ignores most of the

literature on marketing/consumer semiosis. Mick, for example, is nowhere cited. Nor are Miller or Leiss, Kline, and Jhally invoked in the discussion of consumption as a projectible field. Indeed, much of the canon of contemporary materiality is ignored even as the author bemoans the field's neglect.

The principal disappointment of the book is the author's failure to advance the field in ways that macromarketers would find useful, especially where the opportunities are plentiful. A cogent discussion and elaboration of materiality, as opposed to a reductive exposition of materialism, would be welcome. An examination of incorporeal property and inalienable possessions is also warranted. A treatment of symbolic and instrumental dimensions of possessions as a dialectic rather than a dichotomy would be exceedingly helpful. A thorough cross-cultural analysis (or programmatic research recommendation) of self, identity, and materiality is desperately needed. These issues are imminent in her pages, but Dittmar, to be fair, may be speaking primarily to social psychologists rather than to consumer researchers, who may be less attuned to the production of consumption. While the book is well written and produced, its high price is not commensurate to the value it would add as an adopted text or personal library acquisition.

In contrast, macromarketers will find the Rudmin volume to be the genuine article, quite literally. The book is a special issue of the *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, which originated from a symposium of the First European Congress of Psychology and grew with subsequent input from researchers around the world. The editor, a member of the School of Business and Faculty of Law at Queen's University in Ontario, has provided a handbook of the ablest sort. Topic selection is diverse and provocative, and intellectual quality control is rigorous. Multiple perspectives and methods are employed by a multinational cast of authors. Conceptual, empirical, critical, and personal accounts of possession are included. Had the editor been charged with typographical oversight, and encouraged to integrate the articles with his own critical commentary, the volume would have greater coherence and visual appeal. As it stands, the book is a wonderful one-stop shopping source of introduction to the field of ownership.



The volume begins with a challenge to traditional theory issued by several leading consumer researchers. Boulding explores some intriguing interactions between property and polity. Belk attempts to remystify possession by delving into our nonrational relationships with goods. Campbell proclaims the closing of the pre-paradigmatic phase of postmodern consumer research and examines both the multidisciplinary origins and compartmentalization of postmodern consumer research. These introductory essays induce a speculative, discovery-oriented habit of thinking that guides the reader's sensibility through the balance of the book.

Sections on individual and social dimensions of possession, lifecourse influences on ownership, motivations underlying acquisitiveness, and coping with loss comprise the heart of the volume. Essays on social cognition by Rudmin and control motivation by Beggan are intriguing, and a reading of Dittmar's article on identity is more satisfying than her book-length treatment. Gulerce's rethinking of the issue of transitional objects is provocative and should lead to interesting empirical work. The article by Bell and others on stylistic preference is especially useful in considering the interplay between personality and product constellations. Both mnemonic and emplacing capabilities of objects are examined by Joy and Dholakia and by Dawson and Bamossy, respectively. Whether the topic is compulsion, collecting, burglary, intergenerational differences, or intellectual property, these central articles succeed in immersing the reader in the intricacies of the material world.

A particularly evocative section of the volume that should further the pursuit of a more enlightened macromarketing presents a number of critiques of materialism or, perhaps more accurately, a critique of a number of materialisms. Person-object relations are evaluated from Buddhist, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological perspectives, among others. Fournier and Richins invite us to adopt a multidimensional perspective of materialism, Ross challenges us to comprehend nonpossessive ownership, Bloom reacquaints us with the reciprocal dialectics of psychic and social structure building, and Kilbourne helps us to relocate possessions in the lived world. This last author also examines some compelling limitations placed by markets

upon individuals in his examination of symbolic consumption. A rereading of Rudmin's volume might begin with these critiques and would allow the reader to enter into a deeper dialogue with its empiricists in the pencil-noted margins.

A humane conclusion is provided in the form of a personal memoir by pioneer Lita Furby and a rumination by Amitai Etzioni on the emerging discipline of socioeconomics. Furby's retrospective account and Etzioni's prescriptive musing combine to remind us of the interrelatedness of empirical, theoretical, and critical dimensions of our enterprise. The what, how, and why of macromarketing research require simultaneous consideration. By the conclusion of this volume, the reader is moved unequivocally beyond a spurious regret for a stunted line of inquiry and into an orbit of research possibilities grounded firmly in some very fundamental contributions.

This book can be usefully incorporated as required or recommended reading in advanced courses in macromarketing and consumer behavior. The original articles and their citation bases will be useful to doctoral students in each of the subdisciplines of marketing. Contiguous social science disciplines that field courses in the sociality of artifacts will find the volume most congenial as a complement to current materials.

While each of these volumes draws upon social psychology to illuminate ownership and possession, neither invokes the concept of culture to any appreciable degree as an interpretive vehicle. Macromarketers should be aware of the re-emergence of the interdisciplinary field of cultural psychology, as it represents a more holistic avenue of inquiry into consumer object relations (as well as consumer information processing). Cultural psychology is the study of intentional worlds, of constructing and constituting dialectics. Its central premise, of particular relevance to consumer research, is captured in Shweder's (1990, p. 22) trenchant observation: "You can't take the stuff out of the psyche and you can't take the psyche out of the stuff." Recent work—for example, by scholars such as Thomas (1991), who examines the processes of cultural objectification, or Weiner (1992), who refigures reciprocity by reconsidering inalienable possessions, or Pietz (1993), who explores the relationship between fetishism and materialism—has begun to illustrate the need to

incorporate analysis of cultural tradition as well as social practice and psychodynamics into the investigation of the world of goods. We are had just as surely as we have, and future forays into the production of consumption will make this abundantly apparent.

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