



“Summary of article by Helga Dittmar: Material Possessions as Reflections of Identity: Gender, Social-Material Status and Social Groups” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 97-101

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## **“Summary of article by Helga Dittmar: Material Possessions as Reflections of Identity: Gender, Social-Material Status and Social Groups”**

The neoclassical economic model of consumer behavior, with its emphasis on functional use-values, has traditionally ignored the value material possessions contribute to a person’s sense of self. But in fact, many goods have meanings that are important to the development of identity, especially in industrialized countries. This paper argues that such meanings originate in the social realm and that cultural assumptions about gender, class, and status are reflected in the way individuals relate to their most treasured possessions. It suggests that aspects of gender inequalities may be perpetuated with goods that embody stereotypes which shape self-development.

### **PERSONAL IDENTITY & THE MEANINGS OF GOODS**

Aside from the instrumental uses of goods, possessions have meanings that help define a sense of personal identity. Goods may have both public and private meanings: symbols that are ascribed to goods in the cultural realm and more personal meanings that are attached to goods by individuals. Both types of meaning have a role to play in creating a sense of identity through the ownership of goods. Previous research has exaggerated the significance of private meanings, while underemphasizing the contributions of public meanings.

It is commonly assumed that the meanings attached to an individual's most treasured possessions are highly individualistic and private, reflecting memories and feelings that others may not fully appreciate. This view, however, neglects the connections between private meanings and the meanings attached to these goods by other people and cultural influences. For example, owning a fancy automobile may carry certain personal meanings (e.g., its receipt as a gift), these vehicles imply a range of qualities that are determined by cultural influences that exist beyond the individual. There is a strong link between how others react to us on the basis of our possessions, the symbols attached to these goods, and self-perceptions.

Gender and social-material position (a term that covers both socio-economic status and class affiliation) are two of the most important cultural dimensions in which social interactions occur. Given the relationship between other-perception, self-perception, and material symbols, an individual's favorite possessions should reflect cultural assumptions about gender and social-material position. "For example, if female gender identity is characterized by an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, this should be reflected in the meanings women attach to their treasured possessions."(124) Discussed below are the results of a study that examines the

question of whether individuals attach to their possessions personal meanings that reflect socially shared beliefs about gender and social-material position. Cultural assumptions are similar to stereotypes that aid in the organization of perceived reality. These "commonsense notions are an integral part of our shared beliefs, as well as of our social practices. They therefore act as organizing principles of identity construction and constitute the powerful frame of reference within which women and men continue to define themselves." (128)

## **PERSONAL POSSESSIONS AND GENDER IDENTITY**

The term 'gender identity' reflects both an individual's sense of being female or male and cultural assumptions about gender. There is much less research on how individuals view their own gender identity than on social construction of gender stereotypes. Various studies in Britain and the U.S. have shown that maleness is associated with individualistic properties, such as being independent, forceful, and self-sufficient. Femaleness is associated with communal characteristics, such as being warm, understanding and sensitive. Assumptions about gender tend to vary across cultures, and may change even within specific cultures.

A group of 160 British subjects -- business commuters, unemployed people, and students -- were asked to list their five most treasured possessions and the reasons for why these goods were important. Although the findings on gender described here are from the student portion of the sample, the older subjects manifest even more pronounced gender differences in how they relate to their possessions. The students, who were in their early twenties and had recently left home, all tended to discuss their possessions in pragmatic terms, suggesting the importance of goods in establishing an adult identity. Their most treasured objects were classified into seven main types: assets (e.g., financial or property), transport (e.g., car), basic utility (e.g., clothes), leisure (e.g., stereo or television), extensions of self (e.g., trophies), sentimental (photos), and other (documents, plants). Gender differences were most pronounced with respect to the reasons why the listed goods were valuable.

Women gave many more relational than instrumental reasons -- in fact, relational reasons were the ones used most often by women, and least by men. Despite their common concern with functional and use-related features of possessions, men's responses refer strongly to instrumental and use-related features of possessions, whereas women's reasons revolve equally around emotion-related features of possessions and their role as symbols for interpersonal relationships. (132)

Men referred to relationships in less than 6 per cent of their reasons, while women referred to relationships in nearly 30 per cent of their reasons. Women derived a greater sense of personal history from goods that expressed their relationships with others. In contrast, men derived a sense of personal history from their leisure possessions that expressed primarily pragmatic functions. Men generally derived a sense of self-continuity and personal history from their leisure goods

These findings support the argument that commodities can perpetuate sex-role definitions and gender inequalities. In industrialized countries, children are socialized with gendered role models and gendered toys that make it difficult to effect changes in the gender status quo in adult

society. For example, from an early age boys and girls are urged to relate to different types of clothing in distinctive ways. One result is readily apparent in British culture: it is inappropriate for women to wear the dark, plain suits that symbolize male success and authority. Alternatively, if changes in the gender status quo do occur they should be reflected in changing material symbols. Power dressing by women in the United States is an example of just such a change. Shoulder pads and tailored suits with pants are worn by American women to express a look of professional authority previously restricted to men.

## **SOCIAL-MATERIAL STATUS AND POSSESSIONS**

Social psychological research on the relationship between social material position and identity is relatively sparse, compared with that on gender. Sociological findings indicate that classes differ in their aspirations, concerns, and consumption goals. Working classes orient their consumption to short-term gratification, the most preferred leisure goods are recreational. In contrast, middle- and upper-class people want possessions that serve prestige, status and self-expressive needs and have a long-term, delayed gratification perspective, centered on self-development. Working class people describe objects in concrete terms, without much nostalgia, while middle class accounts emphasize the abstract value of steering one's life. In general, individuals in the "lower classes" tend to emphasize their concern with emotional relationships and are concerned with economic security, whereas people from more affluent strata place more emphasis on autonomy and self-actualization.

In the study mentioned above, business commuters and unemployed responses support the notion that individuals in a "higher" social material position view their most important possessions in more symbolic terms than their less affluent counterparts. Interestingly, there was little difference in the types of good listed as most important. Everyone in this part of the sample felt that possessions symbolize one's personal history, but they differed with respect to the types of value associated with their goods. Business commuters viewed their goods as contributing to their personal growth (i.e., a long-term perspective), whereas unemployed people had a larger concern with the here and now, emphasizing the financial, emotional and pragmatic aspects of their goods. The latter finding is not surprising given the levels of economic and emotional insecurity in an unemployed person's life.

Taken together these findings suggest that material possessions are not just expressions of self conceptions, they are also integrally involved in the reproduction of self-definitions, value orientations and general outlook. The social nature of these meanings calls into question the overly individualistic economic model of individual preferences.