

The Psychology of Collecting

By Mark B. McKinley (OH)

Everybody is a Collector

Everybody collects something! Whether it be photographs of a person's vacation, ticket stubs from ballgames, souvenirs of trips, pictures of one's children, athletes' trophies, kids report cards, and those who collect "junk" (pack-rats) and dispose of it in garage sales.

The Evolution of Collecting

On the more formal side of "collecting," it does seem that growing up as "kids," we all collected something we made into a hobby. It could have begun with baseball cards, marbles, or stamps. Then it moved on: to antique books, Longaberger baskets, state quarters, or Atmos clocks. For others it was collecting the really unusual that worked best for them. People actually collect: bad poetry, barbed wire, knock-knock jokes, wax paper liners out of cereal boxes, swizzle sticks, string, mouse pads, phone books, type fonts, clothing of famous people, or Mersenne primes (prime numbers). Indeed, some collectors even collect collecting guides! And, speaking of the unusual, what about the names for the people who collect things? An archtophilist collects teddy bears, a deltiologist collects postcards, a numismatist collects coins, a vecturist collects subway tokens, and a clock collector is a horologist.

Horologists are Special

A note on being a horologist, it's tough. Compared with the collectibles noted prior, collecting clocks requires that consideration be given not to just what is seen, but what is also on the inside, the mechanical stuff, and whether or not it "works!" As a case in point, the Hiller Talking Clock (circa 1911), to work needs a celluloid tape. Of the known Hiller clocks only one has the accompanying tape. Indeed, even the two Hillers in the NAWCC Museum, nor the two Hillers in the authors collection, "run." The author, who collects talking clocks, not only deals with the passive display of time, but the clock has to literally "tell" (talk) the time, and in many instances, the container (box) the clock came in is a valued addition to one's collection.

Supreme Consumers

Surely, people who collect "things" are at the apex of consumerism. While many persons see "shopping" as a chore, something to be endured, many collectors are just the opposite. Spending the weekend combing garage sales, antique stores, and "marts" provides an escape into another world that is both exciting and pleasurable---it gets the adrenaline flowing when a "find" is made. Today, with the advent of the Internet, one can pursue collectibles from the world over and do it from the comfort of home.

Acquisitive pastimes characterize not just ordinary folks but include the "rich and famous." Sharon Stone has collected vintage cashmere sweaters, Jane Seymore collects tea pots; Jenna Elfman collects Indian and Tibetan rugs; Kelsey Grammer has a passion for first edition, rare books; and Tom Hanks has a collection of old typewriters.¹ Possibly Noah was the most famous collector of all. After all, he collected two of every living animal and housed them in one place!

Beyond the merely "rich and famous," during the 1700s and 1800s there were aristocratic collectors, the landed gentry, who roamed the world in search of fossils, shells, zoological specimens, works of art, and books. The collected artifacts were then kept in special rooms ("cabinets of curiosities") for safekeeping and private viewing. A "cabinet" was, in part, a symbolic display of the collector's power and wealth. It was these collectors who established the first museums in Europe, and to a lesser extent in America. Such aristocratic collectors included

Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Francesco I de Medici, Archduke Ferdinand, and Emperor Rudolf II (Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna).² Today, institutions have supplanted the individual aristocratic collectors of the past, and the focus of collecting has broadened greatly, from the dinosaurs to rocks from distant planets.

The Motivations to Collect

Why do we collect things, e.g., Cracker Jack toys, manhole covers, clocks? Some people collect for investment, yet one must wonder how a penny can become worth thousands of dollars. Some collect for pure enjoyment; as noted above, it's fun! Some collect to expand their social lives, attending swap meets and exchanging information with like-minded souls.

Some folks collect to preserve the past, but there can be risk here. In some cases historic artifacts collected are perceived as "stolen" and courts are invoked to return them to their "rightful owners." As has been widely noted, Native Americans have successfully petitioned the courts (under the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) for the return of ancient religious items, and even human remains. Not unrelatedly, medical scientists, anthropologists collected human remains for the purpose of study. Yet, here too the courts have been called into the fray as to who is the proper "owner" of the past, e.g., the Kennewick Man--archaeologists legally fight to study the bones, whereas, Native Americans legally fight to bury them.³

Some collect to learn and preserve history. Such is the case with James Toman who writes about the history of Cleveland, Ohio. To do this he collects postcards. The postcards preserve historical, pictorial glimpses of a city that may otherwise be lost. For some people collecting is simply the quest, in some cases, a life-long pursuit that is never complete. Additional collector motivations include psychological security, filling a void in a sense of self. Or, it could be to claim a means to distinction, much as uniforms make the "man." Collections could be a means to immortality or fame vis a vis Dr. Louis Leakey. For some, the satisfaction comes from experimenting with arranging, re-arranging, and classifying parts of a-big-world-out-there, which can serve as a means of control to elicit a comfort zone in one's life, e.g., calming fears, erasing insecurity. The motives are not mutually exclusive, as certainly many motives can combine to create a collector--one does not eat just because of hunger!

Do collections create happy collectors? It is no surprise the researchers haven't agreed on whether people who have hobbies are happier and more balanced because they collect things, or they collect things because they're already happier and more balanced. Either way, collecting, from the self assessment standpoint of the collector, is nearly always seen as a positive in his/her life.

Collecting vs. Hoarding

Sigmund Freud didn't see collecting as stemming from these kinds of motivations. He postulated that all collecting ties back to the time of toilet training, of course. Freud suggested that the loss of control and what went down the toilet was a traumatic occurrence and that, therefore, the collector is trying to gain back not only control but "possessions" that were lost so many years ago. Well that's Freud. While Freud may clearly have overstated the issue, his explanation serves as a nice segway into the dark-side of "collecting," the psychopathological form described as hoarding. The "abnormality" of the hoarder shows up in those instances where the aberrant behavior interferes with an otherwise "reasonable life." This can sometimes even include gross interference with the lives of others, even leading to enforcement issues. Some theorists suggest that the behavior associated with hoarding can be an extreme variation on compulsive buying. Compulsive buying, in turn, is closely related to major depression, obsessive-compulsive

disorder, and in particular, compulsive hoarding. According to a study by Kyrios, Frost and Steketee, compulsive buying is thought to be influenced by a range of cognitive domains including deficits in decision-making, emotional attachments to objects, and erroneous beliefs about possessions, and other maladaptive beliefs.⁴ Some “experts” have described the psychopathology of hoarding as “Repetitive Acquisition Syndrome.”

A Case Study

Probably the extreme illustration of this is the person who harms others in his/her passion for ‘collecting.’ Such extreme pathology is referenced by “animal or people hoarders.” The former is the person who we read about in the local paper with a headline that reads: “Local Woman Found with 100s of Filthy, Diseased, Malnourished Cats.” On the other hand, there are those collectors who collect people, as in serial killers. Movies such as “The Collector,” and “The Bone Collector,” “Kiss the Girls” portray such persons in a context of a thrilling mystery brought to the entertainment of movie goers. In extreme instances of aberrant collecting what is one to do? A recent case involves a respected former councilman of Amherst, Ohio. “Dr. Phil,” The TV mental health guru Philip McGraw, came to Mr. Mishak’s home in Amherst to see for himself, a 10-year accumulation of junk that ranged from old clothing, windows, and toothpaste tubes, to dead cats. The situation became so bad, and left so little room, Mr. Mishak’s wife moved out of their house, and he followed shortly thereafter. Dr. Phil interpreted Mr. Mishak’s problem as “compulsive hoarding” that served as a coping mechanism for managing anxiety and fear of losing control. Indeed, Mr. Mishak’s self diagnosis was: “If I throw it away, it just seems like some part of me is gone. I’ll never get it back.” In the end, Mr. Mishak agreed to accept help from Dr. Phil, who replied, “If you think you can handle it, we’ll back the truck up (to the house).”⁵ A few weeks later a “convoy of six rigs” showed up with 16 workers” and a Dr. Phil TV crew. “Mishak stood in the front yard looking ill at ease and refused to speak to reporters before retreating inside.”⁶ Since researchers have not agreed on the accountabilities for the pathology of collecting, therapies have had limited success with such persons. We do not yet know the full outcome of Dr. Phil’s “therapy.”

A Lesson Learned

The readers of this article surely should not confuse “collecting” with “hoarding, as collecting is a good-thing. On a personal note, my quest for Talking Clocks was nearly a train wreck, as I became rather obsessively overzealous in amassing over 400 unique pieces. Fortunately, it was a “physician heal thyself” moment and I am moderating my acquisitions (“I do not have to have every type of talking clock ever manufactured,” was insightful advice). I am learning that smart collecting, while *very pleasurable*, is also *information based, limited in scope, and supported by adequate resources*.

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About the Author

Mark B. McKinley is a professor of psychology at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, where he has taught a number of psychology courses for the past 40 years. Dr. McKinley, for the past 15 years has been involved with both the study of the psychology of time (perception) and as a timepiece collector (over 800 talking clocks). They range from the "primitive" Hiller, through radio-controlled atomic talking clocks He had an article published in the June 2004 issue of the NAWCC Bulletin, which has become the impetus for a book on Talking Clocks entitled: TIC, TOCK TALK: The Collected History and Significance of Talking Clocks. McKinley has established the International Society of Talking Clock Collectors (ISTCC). A small part of the ISTCC collection is located at: <http://www.talkingclocks.net>
