

Why Do People Collect Things? On Collectors and Collecting.

My interest in collecting began nearly 50 years ago while driving between New York and Ohio during my undergraduate studies at The Ohio State University. I stopped for coffee and fuel in a small Pennsylvania village off route 80. There, owners of an old barn were doing a brisk business selling antiques. I purchased an old key from the 1870's. Who owned it? What did it open? What was the history, if any, associated with its ending up in that barn? Would it be valuable in the future or was it a replica? Did I overpay? Why did it catch my eye? Later when I became more knowledgeable about keys, I learned it was French, normally used for an armoire and made around 1850; probably brought to the U.S. by immigrants. No doubt the armoire was a treasured possession. The distraction of thinking about my purchase was fun and led to a lifetime avocation.

Over the years I have observed people fascinated by collections of various possessions; top hats, Lionel trains, salt and pepper shakers, Roman coins, Disney pins, umbrellas, walking canes, porcelains; the list is endless. Everyone knows someone who collects a particular type of item; sometimes we laugh at their idiosyncrasies. However, when we pause to consider that most collections in major museums throughout the world are a result of generous donations and bequests which reflect the passion of collectors (or theft of collections, plunder of artifacts) we might consider collecting and collectors from different perspectives.

Reading about collectors, collections and the act of collecting became an enjoyable and harmless pastime. I became interested in research from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. Those reviewing this essay might be surprised to learn that it is thought one out of three individuals throughout the world engage (or have engaged) in some kind of collecting behavior. In the next section of this essay I offer an academic discussion of collectors and collecting which I hope will broaden perspectives on these activities. Presently there is scant agreement on the sociological, political, economic, cultural, anthropological or psychological reasons people engage in collecting behaviors. There is also a lack of consensus on how to study collecting or collectors or how to gauge the value of what is being collected. Collectors have been given credit for helping change 18th century European and

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American cultural “tastes”, social behaviors of the elite in the 19th century, as well as contributing to the rise of commerce in the 14th and 15th Centuries. It has been suggested that collecting behavior in humans finds its roots in the earliest of evolutionary times and is associated with all historical periods in human history. Collecting transcends gender, race, culture, age, religion and income; people from all walks of life collect things.¹

I offer a multi-disciplinary perspective on collecting and collectors. A typology of collecting behavior and a “collecting profile” is presented. Individual and societal outcomes are discussed. A comprehensive bibliography is furnished for those who wish to delve into various disciplinary perspectives. Based on my experience “collecting” behavior is an outcome of normal intellectual development coupled with interactions, occurring later in life, driven by cultural, economic, psychological, and sociological influences. Collecting behavior, at its extremes, represents dysfunctional, criminal or obsessive-compulsive activities. It is precisely because so many variations of collecting behavior are found that broader interpretative models are needed to assess an activity which has been, from the earliest times, common to most cultures and societies.

Defining Collecting Behavior

Collecting is a conscious, enjoyable, and systematic accumulation, over time, of objects or things in similar or like categories. Collecting is a response to conscious and unconscious desires; a blending of nature and nurture. This essay distinguishes collecting from obsessive, criminal, or pathological behaviors (the inability to control buying impulses or inability to throw “things” away). Nor is collecting, as it is defined here, synonymous with gathering wood for winter fires, or food stamps for groceries. Holding onto a first pair of sunglasses or hubcaps may also be described as “collecting” behavior, but not the kind explored here.

Collecting is international in scope and is common throughout many cultures, societies, and political systems. It seems to be a quintessential human pasture. Industries that cater to collectors are as ubiquitous as McDonald’s. Visit any small town and someone is selling antiques. Entire blocks on Manhattan’s east side are devoted to the sale of collectibles. There are upscale and down scale markets for collectors in every major city in the world; from Los Angeles to New York, London to Beijing, Santiago, Jerusalem, and Mumbai. Most bookstores contain a large “collecting” section and it is not uncommon to find numerous books on bottle caps, buttons, furniture, toys, cars, artwork, lace, glass, machinery, door knobs, wine, or nutcrackers. The list is endless. The founding and maintenance of museums and world heritage sites throughout the world provide ample testimony to the powerful urge to accumulate and view objects of beauty and quality. Collecting continues at various intervals

throughout human lives; during childhood, adolescence, or in twilight years. Collecting may occur in groups, by organizations or individually, in rural or urban locations; collections may or may not be displayed.

Collectors themselves are an extremely varied group of individuals and include; children, adolescents, CEOs of major corporations, immigrants, farmers and “average citizens” (whatever that term may mean in 2016). Through persistence and zeal, people may accumulate collections worth extraordinary sums. Groups of collectors specializing in wooden dolls, pewter, teacups, and the like, abound. Collections range from the banal to highly esoteric; for example, old nails, barbed wire, painted rocks, 18th century Latin American silver, 19th century pencil sharpeners, cork screws, Vietnamese pots emblazoned with birds and fish, Victorian tables with dragonfly legs, or old Chinese cameras. In addition to individuals who collect, corporations, communities, universities, and governments engage in collecting. One observation is indisputable; billions of dollars are spent each year throughout the world by collectors and those who facilitate, display or profit from these activities.

Research on Collecting

Collecting behavior has been discussed from many disciplinary vantage points and there is surprisingly little scholarly agreement on the reasons people collect, who collects, why certain objects are collected, or how collecting behavior should be studied. For example, basic concepts regarding property or possessions are not uniformly shared by social scientists. Scholars do not always agree on what constitutes consciousness or how consciousness informs behavior in humans; for example, why we do what we do. Nor are scholars in agreement on basic human motivators for collecting behavior. Disagreement exists over how to best study collecting behavior or whether adequate data are even available for review. Consensus on collecting as “normal behavior”, as opposed to when it is symptomatic of addiction, is lacking. There is also scant research on the relationship between people and their possessions across a life span, nor do scholars concur on whether collecting is influenced by environmental or genetic factors. Disagreement exists over how collecting patterns vary between cultures and nationalities.

Scholars from various disciplinary perspectives have offered different reasons for collecting behavior. A Freudian interpretation (Freud himself was an avid collector) suggests that collecting, reflects an anal character. The Freudian interpretation discussed in the literature (and disputed by many as well) relies primarily on the assumption of a relationship between toilet training and parental authority resulting, later in life, in traits such as obstinacy, orderliness, and parsimony. Building on the work of Freud, others hypothesized collecting behavior is a result of infant experiences and adult pride

in collections as an extension of narcissistic pleasure. Others conceptualized collecting behaviors as a response to stress, anxiety, failed relationships, or as a surrogate for sexual desire.

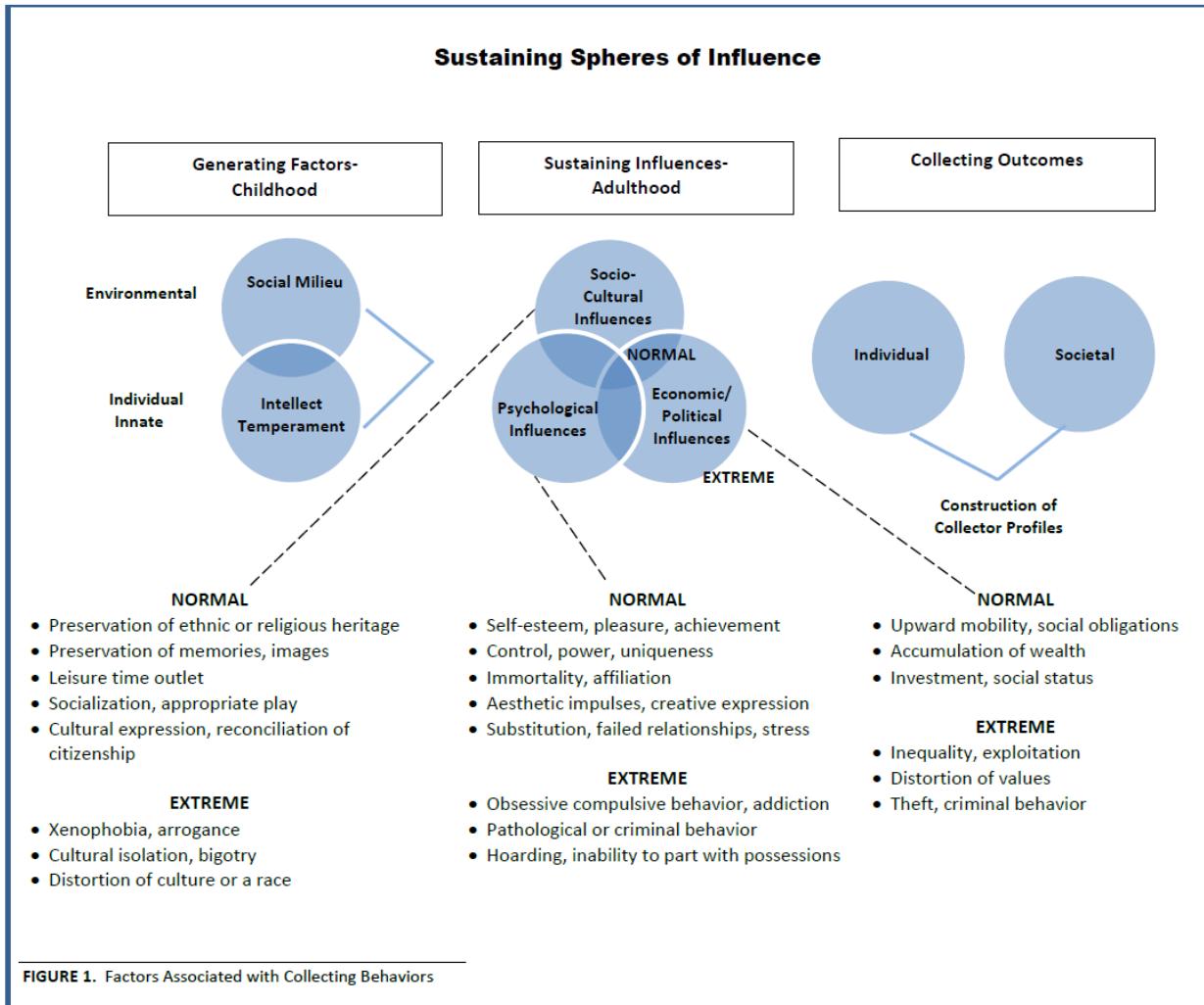
Explanations emphasizing Freudian concepts might be compared with other studies on collecting which stress two basic themes: (a) that collecting is related to a need to exert personal competence, achievement, or control, or, (b) an association exists between collections and a concept of self; for example, collecting fulfills basic human needs including recognition, affiliation, self-esteem, and approval. Such studies suggest that objects or possessions constitute symbols representing aspects of a person's identity; social position, attitudes, or personal qualities. Ways in which people relate to their possessions can be interpreted as a reflection of how they may view themselves or relate to their social and physical worlds.²

An interesting aspect of collecting behavior is its attractiveness for analysis from various disciplinary perspectives. For example, there is considerable attention devoted to collecting behavior by those interested in the rise of capitalism, commerce, consumer behavior, marketing, product branding and investment strategies. Those who have written on social mobility and the behavior of wealthy and elite groups have focused on collecting behavior, as a means to understand how cultural tastes are legitimized and transmitted. The role of criminals in collecting activities has also been explored by those interested in crime (against individuals, groups, religions, or cultures). Those active in museum management discuss collecting and collections and their relationship to particular histories and cultures, as well as what constitutes artistic expression or how art might be displayed.

This essay suggests;

- Collecting behavior results from specific generating factors which are associated with normal intellectual, psychological, and social development;
- Collecting behavior is maintained as a result of these three spheres of sustaining influences (socio-cultural, psychological, economic/political);
- Behavior at the extremes of any of the three spheres of sustaining influences may be unhealthy or dysfunctional; for example, when collecting becomes obsessive-compulsive, anti-social, or a pathological behavior;
- Collecting behavior transcends national and ethnic boundaries, gender, age, social status, religious views, political systems, and is associated with most cultures throughout history;

A diagram depicting the three spheres of sustaining influences is presented in Figure 1.



THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SUSTAINING INFLUENCES

The first sphere of sustaining influences on collecting behavior is attributed to socio-cultural factors. In this context or sphere, collecting behavior can be attributed to: (a) the desire to preserve history, an ethnic or religious heritage, or the preservation of memorable or emotionally devastating experiences or images, or, (b) a leisure time outlet and need for spontaneous activity, or, (c) a manifestation of cultural commitment or the reconciliation of citizenship or nationality.

The Desire to Preserve History, an Ethnic or Religious Heritage, Memorable Experiences or Images

Humans are fascinated with antiquity. An interest in accumulating unique objects of beauty or curiosity has been a preoccupation from the earliest civilizations. In imperial Rome, antiques, art, and historical artifacts were collected. Art dealers, including dealers of forgeries and fakes, also flourished. In medieval Europe, the church and its religious leaders were primary collectors; some might argue church officials hoarded art, although they also saved it from destruction! Visit the Borghese Mansion in Rome and one cannot fail to appreciate the collection of art housed there although the history of how certain pieces arrived; Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Renaissance and the like, present us with conflicting emotions. The Medici Family (at least two Popes were associated with this family) acquired collections that enable a glimpse into Roman and medieval times. The art and antiques owned and presently exhibited in the Vatican museum are equaled only by a small number of museums in the world. Later, during the Renaissance, the nobles of Europe, led by the Medici's of Florence, expressed through patronage the notion that cultural eminence was as essential to their positions as military prowess. Inventory taken upon the death of Lorenzo Medici (The Magnificent) in 1492 included paintings by Van Eyck and Uccello, the horn of the unicorn (most likely the tusk of a narwhale), Chinese porcelain, and Roman cameos.³

Personal taste and “connoisseurship” graced homes of the 16th and 17th century monarchs. Intricate cabinets were constructed where collections of all kinds were displayed. An emerging class of wealthy American industrialists throughout the late 1800s and 1900s endeavored, through collecting, to cultivate the same tastes as European royalty. Since today’s treasures may be yesterday’s utilitarian objects, there is, in collecting, an opportunity to witness a succession of ideas through which the minds of men and women have progressed since the dawn of history. One expert on the collection of walking canes observed that prior to 1920, canes were part of all well-dressed socialites’ wardrobes. Whether the cane is viewed as a utilitarian tool, or social statement, a collection provides a fascinating study of the ever shifting interests, events, and whims of humanity. Tracing collections of cotton, wool, locks and keys, or the decorative arts, through the centuries provides a glimpse into the evolution of intellectual and functional (mechanical) ideas.

In contemporary society, collectors preserve a heritage, a memory or “forgotten” culture. The collector of “memorabilia” may endeavor to preserve something (perhaps a “period” of time) in the past. Collections give expression and meaning or allow an interpretation of past experiences; grandparents (or homelands) can be memorialized by objects held in high esteem by earlier generations.

The adolescent who painstakingly arranges postcards from family trips can return to the adventure by rummaging through a shoe box. Many people seek to recall past events and places in glowing and happier images.

Collecting can be associated with the reclamation of a heritage. This is reflected in scholarly inquiry in emerging disciplinary fields. Collections of recipes and cookbooks were thought noteworthy by some seeking to study the historical antecedents of feminist culture in America. Another collection, the Mitchel Wolfson, Jr. Collection of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, provides testimony about how societies preserve and inculcate political doctrine. It has been suggested that some collect ethnic memorabilia despite their portrayal of racism. Perhaps this stems from a desire to bear witness to or preserve a history that reflects grave injustices as well as triumphs despite all odds.

Collections enable the reconciliation of past losses (or gains) with present realities. Various collecting strategies can be attributed to spiritual influences where collecting provides an outlet for activities governed by complex belief systems. Collecting is also associated with the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood, or to obligations imposed on others by older community members.

An Outlet for Leisure Time

The concept of leisure and its growth in post-industrial societies has been discussed extensively. Those who have written on leisure activities have identified collecting as one of the primary manifestations of leisure; collecting is fun! Leisure and collecting activities have been associated with human bonding, respect between people, as well as recreation, relaxation, and the integration of culturally relevant activities into people's lives.

Collectors of ceramics, musical instruments, plane models, or smoking pipes, for example, may reflect activities that reward intellectual curiosity or physical prowess, or provide an opportunity to refine eye-hand coordination skills. Collectors of items such as older glass or metal may be interested in the application of industrial technology during the 18th or 19th centuries. Those interested in decorative articles from paper pulp may be fascinated with the properties of paper and the impact of varying technologies and cultural influences. Such collecting activities comprise one of the few outlets for creative thinking, spontaneous activity, and play later in life which may evoke earlier memories or set the stage for new ventures. There is some evidence professional athletes may begin collecting their equipment when it is no longer functional. Examples of individuals who turned hobbies or recreational activities into "collecting" businesses are common.

Cultural Expression, the Reconciliation of Citizenship or Nationality

One of the most renowned collectors of the 18th century engaged in collecting in reaction to what he perceived as deterioration in the cultural and political tenor of his times. Englishman Horace Walpole (during the mid-1700s he built an estate named Strawberry Hill for his collections of art, furniture and the like) was motivated to preserve a “dying” culture. Individuals of wealth and status were then involved in a classical revival, a romanticism of the past, manifested in Gothic architecture (and a reaction to republican politics sweeping through Europe). The same motivation may be attributed to those who bequeathed possessions to museums; the Musee Jacquemart-André in Paris comes to mind. Later in the 1800s, an American, George Vanderbilt established “Biltmore” an estate in North Carolina, as a major center not dissimilar to Walpole’s Strawberry Hill. In Vanderbilt’s case and others of his social status, collecting appears to have been motivated by cultural imperatives, particularly the obligation to entertain guests in regal settings befitting a newly emerging industrial class. Similar examples abound, for example the Getty Museum or The John and Mable Ringling Museum, now part of Florida State University through a bequest. In citing these examples I do not condone or justify the attitudes, behaviors or values such individuals may have exhibited towards workers, minorities, or other ethnic or religious groups. They commissioned and assembled great collections of art, architecture, furniture and the like, just as earlier generations commissioned Michelangelo or Rembrandt.

The relationship between collecting and culture is complex. Ownership of material possessions is deeply rooted in Western culture. Studies of stamp collectors, posit that culture and collecting are intimately intertwined; for example, collecting behavior gives evidence of symbolic attachment to cultural values, confirms a national identity through collecting, or suggests that collectors seek national and cultural self-realization. Others have argued the most cherished possessions of later adulthood are those associated with intellectually contemplative and culturally symbolic activities.⁴ Similarly, there is evidence of a connection between treasured objects and cultural-religious associations. In the United Kingdom, groups collect objects common to particular industries (now largely defunct) from specific regions of the country; for example, locks and keys in central England. Collecting societies enable participants to share a common heritage and mutual interests within accepted social settings (newsletters are published, conferences are organized) all of which encourage and facilitate the continuation of collecting activities.⁵

Perhaps, another example of the complex relationship between culture, religion, and collecting can be observed in people who live in the Caribbean, Central America or West Africa. Here, followers of an ancient religion (Vodun or Voudou as it is known in the Americas) infused with Christianity, may

collect and worship sculpture or other items associated with rituals honoring deities or ancestors who enabled a connection between the natural and material world and that of the dead.

SUSTAINING ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES

Economic and political factors form a second sphere for influencing collecting behavior. The desire to accumulate valuable objects and, in so doing, act in a manner commensurate with those who have status and recognition (and be perceived by others to have status) motivates behavior. This observation has long been chronicled by historians, political theorists, and social and behavioral scientists. “A prince should also show his esteem for talent, actively encouraging able men paying honor to eminent craftsmen,” noted Machiavelli. A desire to accumulate wealth and bequeath items of beauty to the next generation (that one’s name lives on as a benefactor of art) has motivated some of world’s greatest collectors. Studies on possessions and collecting have found that these behaviors are associated with how people feel about themselves and, in turn, how they are perceived by others.

Economic and political factors contribute to collecting behaviors in two general ways: (a) a desire to purchase and sell objects perceived to have potential worth or investment value, or (b) collections validate newly acquired financial or political status or signify to others the collector is an upwardly mobile individual. The first proposition is offered although the literature is divided on the question of whether collections are good investment strategies. The economic motive for “investment” and its impact on collecting behavior is debated even though there is considerable evidence many collections do appreciate in economic value. Authors of popular books on antique collecting, routinely boast information to make “collectors” rich. Collecting, according to this group is, “the lure of the treasure hunt, where you just might pick something up for next to nothing which could turn out to be immensely valuable”. Of course, the concept of something of “value” is itself based on shared symbolic meanings of possessions. It would appear, however, that economic and political factors work to influence humans to strive to collect “scarce goods” or other objects with perceived value.

The emerging class of wealthy American capitalists in the late 19th century provide an excellent example of what is being discussed. Builders of American fortunes (some of whom were labeled as Robber Barons, egregiously unsympathetic and exploitative of working people); families such as Havermeyer, Rockefeller, Sackler, Fogg, Ford, Busch, Hearst, Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan, assembled or facilitated collections of art, sculpture, furniture, and exotic plants. One of the primary reasons is thought to be a desire to legitimize economic or political status (although it would be fair to say many were cultured connoisseurs as well). They were not necessarily defined in society by inherited positions or status but by what they could achieve, and certainly one aspect of achievement is reflected by the

acquisition of material possessions. The Frick, Whitney, Guggenheim and Gardiner collections became associated with important museums in New York and Boston. The Vanderbilt home (Biltmore) in North Carolina, scores of Victorian homes in Newport, Rhode Island, the Hearst Museums in California, Dali Museum in Florida, all serve as testimonials to collecting desires to enjoy art, transmit culture, and augment acquired status. Certainly the initial development and institutionalization of American museums can be attributed to these individuals (and earlier generations driven by similar desires).⁶ Less studied is the role colleges and universities have played in collecting and displaying art and whether universities too seek to enhance reputation and status through such bequests. Regardless, there are, in fact, wonderful and unique University collections; the early American furniture and cabinets housed in the museum of the Rhode Island School of Design comes to mind. Collectors in the U.S. enhanced University endowments and a number lent their names to Colleges and Universities as well.

Others who have studied collecting behavior have drawn an analogy between emerging capitalist societies and upward mobility. Stamp collecting has been studied frequently and seems to be the perfect metaphor for the values of the free market, an activity that confirms the ways and values of commerce. Stamps were sought after for their intellectual and market value, and stamp collectors it was thought exemplified the “middle-men” of capitalism through the buying and selling of stamps. According to this thesis, stamp collecting affirmed capitalist values and the free market economy (all of which may come as a real surprise, in my opinion, to many stamp collectors).

Collecting behavior is also demonstrated by contemporary groups or individuals still struggling to achieve greater economic, social, and political equality. While collecting can be relaxing, or a strategy to demonstrate mobility and status, it may also reflect simple greed. Those who can afford it or who possess the time may simply want to indulge themselves.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSTAINING INFLUENCES

Different psychological factors may exert varying levels of influence on behavior during particular life cycle phases of collectors. Psychological causes of collecting behavior are alternately guided and informed by socio-cultural and economic political influences. Most agree however, that in some way, collecting makes people feel special and unique. No one else may own a collection of, for example, different types of sand, cigar bands, ceramic mice, or old shaving kits, quite like the collector!

Security, Expressions of “Power,” or Achievement Motives During Life Cycle Stages

Those who have studied human behavior have devoted attention to the development of personality, personality disorders, and a focus on objects. Surrounding oneself with familiar objects

provides order, power and security. People may leave homelands or change jobs, careers, neighborhoods, families, but collections are fixed constellation in an ever evolving world. Collecting also enables control over activities. This is not insignificant in turbulent environments (or in the later years when health declines) where individuals are often unable to control anything, particularly the aging process. The collector who purchases, arranges, classifies mounts, identifies, and displays a collection can control the immediate environment. Those who collect may seek to escape the chaos and frenzy of contemporary living. In this sense, collecting provides a distraction and, in some circumstances, may divert individuals from personal responsibilities.

Observations on collecting behaviors are offered by those who studied the power motive and arousal experiences in humans. Those who test high on the need to assert power may desire to join or impress a particular group, again through collecting symbols associated with prestige. Ways of experiencing power are linked to assertive acts which expand the “self” to make it feel stronger. In this sense, a drive for power may be related to particular stages of development described by several of the pioneers of behavior theory and motivation. “A child learns soon enough that while his mother may make him do something, she cannot control what he thinks; and eventually by extension, the adult who employs this modality of feeling powerful may accumulate possessions. Here the adult may seek power by collecting Cadillacs, rifles, credit cards, all of which may represent the urge to feel empowered”.⁷

Hoarding and collecting instincts. The hoarding instincts of animals may provide interesting clues to understanding collecting behavior in humans. Animals hoard to meet future uncertainties. Among certain rodents, the instinct to hoard can be greater (and distinct from) the need to satisfy hunger. The hamster collects or hoards more food than necessary to hedge against periods when food is scarce.

A distinction is invariably made between collecting as a mode of healthy psychological functioning and hoarding itself, normally thought of as an obsessive-compulsive disorder or other form of dysfunctional behavior. In three studies of hoarding behavior in college students and community volunteers conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was reported the onset of hoarding behavior is developed during childhood and adolescence. A model was suggested which conceptualizes hoarding as an avoidance behavior tied to indecisiveness and perfectionism. Hoarders tended to buy extra things in order not to be caught without a needed item. They collected more in order to avoid the decision required to throw something away and the worry which accompanies that decision (worry that a mistake has been made). Hoarders tended to shun emotional reactions which accompany parting with cherished possessions and hoarding was associated with increased perception of control.⁸

The relationship between hoarding and collecting has been noted in numerous studies. Ironically, hoarders may develop idiosyncratic tastes resulting in collections which become extremely valuable.

Deprivation and compensation. Individuals may feel deprived as children, or perceive a loss at a later stage in adolescence. In some instances, deprivation is a product of a broken home, poverty, wars, ethnic strife, or racial injustice—all of which may leave deep emotional scars. Feelings of deprivation may manifest themselves, later in life, in the desire to overcompensate by surrounding oneself with material objects (power or people) denied or missing during an earlier stage of life. This may be particularly true for people who grow up in poverty (or perceive themselves to have been poor in comparison to others). Collecting may also be attributed to an individual's desire to be associated with important things or people. In these instances, beauty, quality, or prestige may be sublimated to "associational" desire; connection to historical periods, or watershed events. The face powder brush used by Anne Boleyn on the morning of her death or pearls worn by Marie Antoinette shortly before hers, which now lie side by side in a private family's collection of royal souvenirs, have a worth of their own as ivory or pearls, but that value would seem to pale in comparison to their association.⁹

In his analysis of Freud's passionate collecting of antiques, Gedo argues that Freud's collecting behavior was an adaptive means of avoiding vulnerability in relationships. Gedo postulated that Freud collected as a means to retain effective control over possessions (as a substitute for lesser control over relationships). "His unusual attitude toward artifacts was established presumably as a consequence of repeated early disappointments in human caretakers".¹⁰

Substitution and fantasy desires. In cases where the object of one's desire may be forbidden or unobtainable, collecting may help satisfy an unconscious need for pleasure or release tension. One study asked if men who collect G.I. Joe dolls do so because of the reassuring and positive effects of the masculine figure.¹¹ Collecting may also be linked to a rich fantasy life; for example, how people may have wanted to live or work in earlier eras. One of the foremost experts on the collection of jewelry writes, "Jewelry plays a greater role in today's world than it ever did in the past. No more is its use and collection the privilege of the wealthy. The broadening of the social structure of contemporary society and the burgeoning concept of what a jewel is, or can be, has evolved. The basic appeal of jewelry lies in the satisfaction of primitive needs. Its use becomes mean of releasing us to fantasize about ourselves, our lives, our world."¹²

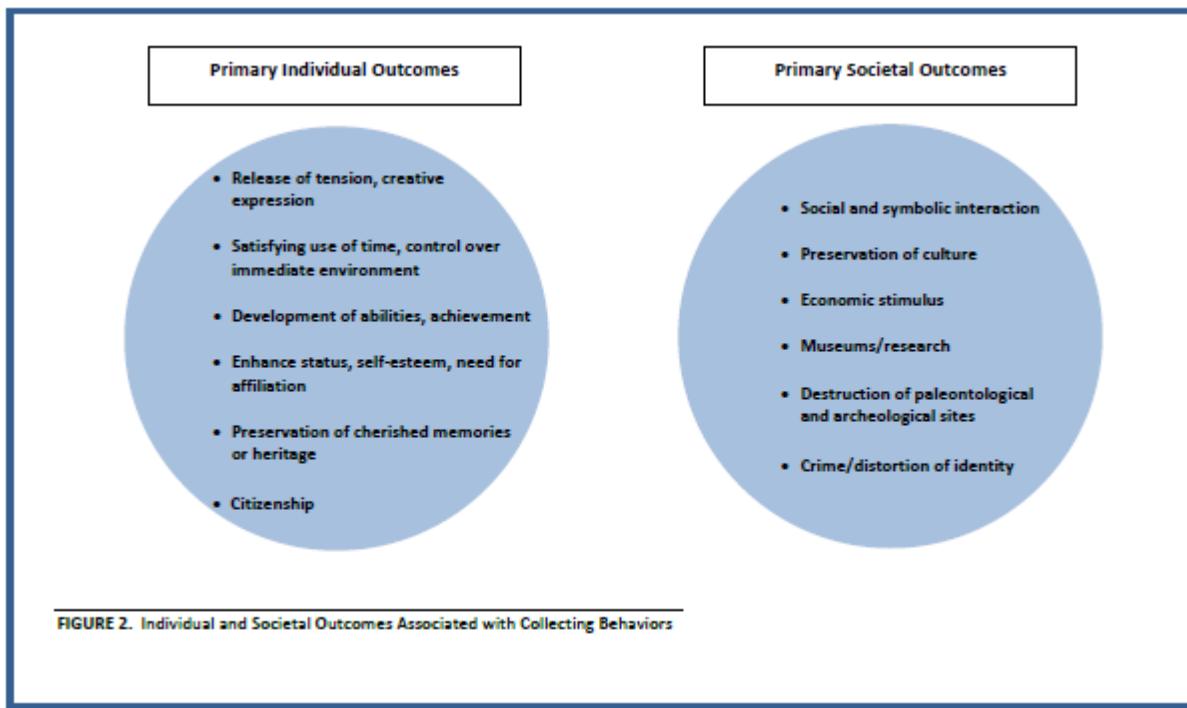
Artistic and aesthetic impulses. Most people, in my opinion, have aesthetic impulses. Aesthetic impulses enable artists to create something of beauty (or manipulate reality) and in this manner change a viewer's perception of a scene, person, or epic. These impulses do not necessarily result in collecting

behavior, but may. In fact, in my experience collectors, sometimes see themselves as “aesthetics” rather than as “collectors” or “dealers.” One study noted that collector-dealers perceived economic encounters at commercial gun shows as teaching opportunities concerning the symbolic use of guns. Such encounters, produce “aesthetic value”, even when objects exchanged were conventionally defined as symbols of violence.¹³

When the collector arranges and displays objects, there is in my estimation, an unmistakable effort, like an artist, to alter a viewer’s perception of reality and, perhaps, change how the collector is perceived by others. Possessions may be part of a mystique presented to an audience. By manipulating possessions, people may exert control over the perceptions of others. Although some collectors are highly secretive, most collectors in my experience are pleased to hear, “What a beautiful and creative display. I never imagined these could be arranged like this.” While it is farfetched to equate my late Uncle Mort, who collected fifty-year old shaving utensils, to Claude Monet, Mort may have indeed responded, in his own pedestrian manner, to internal aesthetic impulses.

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETAL OUTCOMES

Much attention has been paid to the outcomes of collecting behavior by those who write from the perspective of the value of collecting to economic outcomes, consumer behavior and commerce.¹⁴ Although collecting is an activity with considerable economic implications, few, if any, reliable studies exist on the degree of investments and commercial capital attributed to collecting. An attempt is made to describe individual and societal outcomes of collecting (Figure 2). The development of collecting profiles and typologies are also suggested.



A Collector Profile

The following “collector profile” is offered and is associated with individual characteristics of collectors.

Collectors love the process of collecting more than the product; they appreciate the value of a collection (its individual worth is not as important as the “collection” itself). Collectors may be shrewd business people and obtain considerable wealth through collecting strategies. One immediately thinks of the few art dealers who recognized the value of impressionist paintings in the mid to late 19th Century. They purchased entire collections from now well-known painters; artists who were at that time largely shunned by the established art community. The same may be said of those who collect land or stocks for investment purposes. Collectors enjoy admiration from others and desire an audience (collecting generates self-esteem and brings social approval). Collectors can be self-effacing because, even though the collection provides an identity to the collector, the collection is often perceived as more important than the owner. Collectors may feel differently from non-collectors; they may feel relaxed and accomplished (collecting is a pleasurable activity that satisfies basic needs for recognition, affiliation, and self-esteem), they may feel vulnerable (collections must be protected), may be more skeptical (collectors must know how to say no, must know a fake), may be perfectionists (perfection lies not in improving the structure of an item but in restoring it to its pristine condition), may be provoked by anxiety (collections are never complete, the quality and quantity will be scrutinized by peers), or their

collections may make them feel more powerful and in control of their environment (people are sometimes obsessed with self-importance as a reaction to being cognizant of their lack of importance).

Collectors may see themselves as guardians of a dying culture or pioneers in the transmission of new cultural values. Collections of art have served as either a bulwark against or conveyor of new economic or political realities. Collectors sometimes become involved in the continuous process of discarding established values and rediscovering new or neglected ones. Collectors normally want more of what is being collected. They may feel safer with objects than people. Collectors preserve objects from past societies and may perceive a conflict between their need to idealize relationships in life and their devotion to material things. Collectors are resilient and have the ability to start anew (collections are acquired piece by piece, but usually sold as a whole). Collectors may also long to be rid of the collecting desire and may feel weighed down by their collections (collections must be housed, displayed, protected, insured, updated, restored, etc.).

Development of Collecting Typologies

Given the acceptance of generating factors and interactions between sustaining spheres of influence, the following propositions on collecting behavior are offered.

- Collecting impulses are probably innate but must be nurtured and molded during the early years of life. Collecting behavior is related to socialization, modeling, and cognitive development, internal drives to obtain pleasure, compensate for perceived loss, or as a response to other unconscious motivating factors;
- Opportunities and parental reinforcement for collecting are usually present; for example, rewards or praise from parents, communities, or selected groups. Collectors invariably need financial resources and time to engage in this activity;
- Collectors perceive value (and are or feel rewarded) for their actions. Collectors see their objects as a potential investment. There is gratification in owning something;
- Collecting enables balance or reconciliation between life's transitional stages. Collectors may be motivated by the need to control, self-actualize, or escape a particular aspect of their lives during transitional periods. Males and females have similar motivations but collect different types of objects;
- The need to embellish one's life or lifestyle is a present in collectors. They may wish to demonstrate status through collecting, transmit a cultural heritage, or align themselves with

“objects” which are thought to be associated with more exciting or more socially accepted lifestyles;

- Collectors may exhibit a desire to act upon dramatic or artistic impulses or the need to concretize abstract thoughts. Collectors may seek admiration from others;
- Compulsive collecting can be a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive or criminal disorders.

Societal Outcomes

Measuring the impact of human behavior on society is difficult at best. The greatest social and political thinkers have devoted themselves to these issues—hardly the aim of this paper or ability of the author. In much of the contemporary research and popular writing on collecting, there is no uniform agreement on the basic concepts; for example, how to study collecting, why certain objects are collected, whether collecting is a good investment, how collections appreciate in value, the number of people who collect, or the amount of commerce and funds dependent on collecting behaviors. With these precautionary caveats in mind, the following propositions are offered:

- Collecting fundamentally influences social and symbolic interaction in society. Collectors are groups of people who coalesce around specific interests and who promote the safeguarding and preservation of culture;
- Collecting exerts a considerable impact upon the actions of museums, trends in commerce, and solvency in the world of the art, furniture, antiques and decorative art;
- Collecting helps to determine, and is itself a manifestation of, what elite groups in society deem fashionable, stylistic, or aesthetic. Collections help establish a shared social reality;
- Collecting transcends income, gender, racial, and ethnic boundaries. However, collecting may symbolize group status. It is an activity historically associated with opulent lifestyles and/or mobility of emerging classes, religions or cultural behaviors;
- Collecting can serve as an alternative to an increasing sense of anomie in modern society. People attach and commit to objects rather than work, community, family, or religion;
- Collecting has unintended consequences such as the destruction of paleontological, archeological, or historical sites. In turn, certain groups endeavor to destroy other cultures, commit genocide or subjugate another people, through the destruction of collections or artifacts of what the weaker group may view as culturally, historically or religiously important;

Summary

Collecting behavior is best understood from broad perspectives based on reading in history, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, political science, museum management, literature or psychology. There is a general lack of consensus on the best methodologies or disciplinary approaches to study this phenomenon. What is needed is a more precise understanding of the causal relationships between various sustaining variables and how these relationships may predict specific outcome behaviors. The variables identified in this essay account for a variety of human behaviors; it is difficult to isolate collecting behavior.

Further research on sustaining spheres of influence and the relationship to collecting behaviors would be of interest. Can we identify evidence which would help refine the relative importance of investment versus the need to preserve history? It would appear that collecting objects is a common activity of individuals with newly acquired wealth. The extent to which social status is legitimated through collecting behaviors deserves further study.

While psychological observations provide explanations for collecting behaviors, particularly in extreme behavior, the extent to which political, economic and cultural stimuli effect collecting have been less explored. It is also the case that organizations (universities, libraries, wineries, corporations, governments) engage in collecting behaviors. It would seem that different kinds of theories are needed to account for these activities.

The relationship of collecting to psychological health and well-being is in need of refinement. For example, why do some people collect stamps and others Barbie dolls? What is the relationship of collections of particular items to general health? Future studies might also inquire why some collections are displayed and others are hidden. Do people collect as a result of marriage or divorce? Is collecting an escape or alternative to personal stimuli? Collecting appears to be associated with obsessive-compulsive and pathological behavior as well as with normal functioning adults; obviously there are intervening variables. The relationship of innate intellectual resources (hereditary factors) as opposed to environmental causes for collecting behavior could be explored. For example, are collectors individuals who possess greater capabilities than non-collecting adults? These are questions which, if answered, may shed important information on the role of social background, environment, and adult achievement. For those who have found the time to read this essay and who wish to discuss some materials and footnotes, I would be delighted to engage in these conversations.

Endnotes

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