

Why are we so attached to our things? - Christian Jarrett

After **witnessing** the violent **rage** shown by babies whenever **deprived** of an item they considered their own, Jean Piaget, a founding father of **child** psychology, observed something **profound** about human **nature**. Our sense of ownership **emerges** incredibly **early**.

Why are we so **clingy**? There's a well-established **phenomenon** in psychology known as the **endowment effect** where we **value** items much **more highly** just as soon as we **own** them. In one famous **demonstration**, students were **given** a **choice between** a coffee mug or a Swiss chocolate bar as a **reward** for helping out with **research**. Half chose the mug, and half chose the chocolate. That is, they seemed to value the two **rewards** similarly. Other students were given a mug first and then a **surprise** chance to swap it for a chocolate bar, but only **11%** wanted to. Yet another group started out with chocolate and most **preferred** to **keep** it rather than **swap** it. In other words, the students nearly always **put greater value on** whichever reward they **started out with**.

Part of this has to do with how quickly we **form connections** between our **sense of self** and the **things we consider ours**. That can even be seen at the **neural** level. In one experiment, **neuroscientists** scanned participants' brains while they **allocated** various objects either to a basket labeled "mine," or another labeled, "Alex's." When participants **subsequently** looked at their new things, their brains showed more **activity** in a region that usually **flickers** into life whenever we think about ourselves.

Another reason we're so **fond of** our **possessions** is that from a young age we believe they have a **unique essence**. Psychologists showed us this by using an **illusion** to **convince** three to six-year-olds **that** they built a copying machine, a **device** that could create perfect **replicas** of any item. When **offered** a choice between their **favorite toy** or an apparently **exact copy**, the majority of the children favored the **original**. In fact, they were often horrified at the **prospect of** taking home a **copy**.

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This **magical** thinking about objects isn't something we **grow out of**. Rather it **persists** into **adulthood** while becoming ever more **elaborate**. For example, consider the huge value **placed on** items that have been owned by **celebrities**. It's as if the buyers believed the objects they'd **purchased** were somehow **imbued with** the essence of their **former** celebrity owners.

For similar reasons, many of us are **reluctant** to **part** with family **heirlooms** which help us feel **connected** to lost loved ones. These beliefs can even **alter** our **perception** of the **physical** world and change our **athletic** abilities. Participants in a recent study were told they were using a golf **putter** once owned by the champion Ben Curtis. During the experiment, they **perceived** the hole **as** being about a centimeter **larger** than controlled participants using a **standard** putter and they sank slightly more **putts**.

Although feelings of **ownership** emerge early in life, culture also **plays a part**. For example, it was **recently discovered** that the Hadza people of northern Tanzania who are **isolated from** modern culture don't **exhibit** the endowment effect. That's possibly because they live in an **egalitarian** society where almost everything is **shared**. At the other **extreme**, sometimes our **attachment** to our things can go too far. Part of the cause of **hoarding disorder** is an **exaggerated** sense of **responsibility** and **protectiveness** toward one's **belongings**. That's why people with this **condition** find it so difficult to **throw** anything away.

What remains to be seen today is how the **nature** of our relationship with our possessions will change with the **rise of digital technologies**. Many have **forecast** the **demise** of **physical books** and music, but for now, at least, this seems **premature**. Perhaps there will always be something **uniquely** satisfying about holding an **object** in our hands and calling it our **own**.