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Publication Date

2021-06-01

DOI

10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.012

Peer reviewed



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Object attachment as we grow older

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Extreme object attachment in adults can form as a way to compensate for a lack of interpersonal attachment or as a symptom of hoarding disorder; however, normative levels of object attachment also exist across the lifespan. Although the importance of secure interpersonal attachment as a protective factor for older adults has been well established, research into object attachment in older adults is still a nascent field. As individuals age, they inevitably experience a series of cognitive, emotional, and physical changes that may influence their attachment to objects. Life events may impact the way that we view our possessions, particularly over time. Given individual differences, multiple pathways may affect normative object attachment as we age.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2021, 39:105–108

This review comes from a themed issue on **Object attachment**

Edited by **Melissa Norberg** and **Derek Rucker**

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.08.012>

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Introduction

The theory of interpersonal attachment was originally developed over half a century ago through the research of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth [1] and has since developed into a field of research spanning the lifespan [2]. The concept of object attachment is similarly well archived [3]; however, the majority of empirical research on the subject is limited to children and the transition into adolescence. Object attachment is the experience a person has when they feel an emotional attachment to an inanimate object and may even feel a sense of loss if they were to part with the object [4]. Extreme object attachment in adults can form as a way to compensate for a lack of interpersonal attachment [5] or as a symptom of hoarding disorder [6]; however, normative levels of object attachment also exist across the lifespan. For example,

many adults own a ‘favorite dress’ or a ‘lucky sweatshirt’ to which they feel emotionally attached, whether for aesthetic (‘I like how I look when I wear it’), sentimental (‘My mother gave me this necklace’), or superstitious purposes (‘If I wear this on gameday, my football team will win’).

Although the importance of secure interpersonal attachment as a protective factor for older adults has been well established [7], research into object attachment in older adults is still a nascent field. As individuals age, they inevitably experience a series of cognitive, emotional, and physical changes that may influence their attachment to objects. In this review, we will discuss aspects that may impact an attachment to objects in older adulthood from a biopsychosocial perspective. To supplement the dearth of research on normative object attachment in late life, we will also incorporate research on extreme object attachment, in the form of hoarding, into the discussed theoretical model of object attachment and aging.

Predictive factors of object attachment in older adulthood

Reinforcement of cognitions related to objects

Older adults with hoarding disorder report that they initially experienced symptoms of difficulty discarding before the age of 20, and that symptoms continued to increase throughout the lifespan [8]. Congruently, prevalence of hoarding disorder increases with age, and this increase is likely driven by increased levels of difficulty discarding [9]. Normative increases in object attachment may be similarly linked to increased difficulties with discarding possessions. Within a sample of middle-aged and older adults (mean age 64) with hoarding disorder, a desire to save an item because of emotional significance was uniquely predictive of self-reported difficulty discarding [10]. As adults age they may have increased sentimental thoughts toward their possessions that elicit subsequent increases in attachment to those objects. The increase in sentimental thoughts may be through the use of objects to recall and reminisce about pleasant memories [11**]. The process of using objects to recall pleasant memories may be part of a self-reinforcing cycle that leads to further increased levels of attachment to objects. For example, an older woman who possesses an art project her child made in elementary school may find that, over time, her attachment to the art project increases the more that she uses it as a cue to reminisce about her time as a young mother. Her fondness for the art project may then lead to increased use of the art project as a memory device.

Life events

Life events may impact the way that we view our possessions, particularly over time. For example, an often age associated issue is managing a relative's estate after death. Many older adults are faced with inheriting items at some point in their lives and may feel overwhelmed with how to manage the possessions. They might simply wish to have it all discarded while others feel a sense of sentimentality about the items. For those with sentimental feelings about the items, they may experience an increase in object attachment.

Widowhood produces a complex set of physical and emotional reactions [12]. It brings its own unique feelings and beliefs about items once belonging to a deceased partner. The emotions associated with the items can range from positive, sentimental feelings to negative, grief and loss. For example, older adults may keep symbolic items of their deceased partner such as a ring, framed military flag, or photos. Clinically, we have seen evidence that there is often a sense of grief if the item is lost. For example, an older widow who has lost her wedding ring may feel like she has lost her sense of connection with her deceased partner and re-experience some of the grief she felt with the initial loss of her husband.

World events do not necessarily increase object attachment [13]. Anecdotally, the authors have experienced that there is a misconception in common discourse that those who went through the great depression have a stronger appreciation for items and tend to keep those items than more recent generations. Research has not proven this to be the case, although it may impact beliefs about buying and storing items [13]. Recent developments with the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in media speculation that this will result in greater attachment to items and increased hoarding behaviors of essential items (e.g. nonperishable foods, toilet paper). It is not yet clear whether these collecting behaviors and sense of relief of hoarding items is a temporary response to world events or will dissipate with improved safety and economic conditions.

Normative aging role transitions may also become a factor in the way in which a person is oriented to objects. Moving from working status to retirement, owning a large home to a small apartment, or becoming a grandparent may impact views on possessions and object attachment. The behaviors in these role transitions vary similarly to loss [14]. For example, some older people may be inclined to give all their former career tools or items away while others might decide to keep them for posterity. Furthermore, grandparents may experience an increase in attachment to family objects that they want to pass long to their younger relatives.

Beliefs

Sentimental beliefs are likely to play a significant role in the development of attachment to objects as an adult [15,16]. Beliefs about memory also play a role in the presence of object attachment in older adults. If an older adult cannot find an object they used to possess that was linked with a core memory, then they may feel as though they will not remember an important event or person. For example, if an older adult believes that they will forget aspects of their family life when they had young children, they may believe that they need to keep all their children's artwork from school. Or, they may want to remember their military service and thus, keep items associated with it for fear they will forget. Again, these objects may generate a sense of comfort depending on the content of the memory. Beliefs about beauty and wastefulness, common themes reported by adults with hoarding disorder [10], are likely to also impact normative attachment to objects in late life.

Physical status

As individuals age, their bodies inevitably lose some of the functionality of their youth [17]. The loss of functioning has been punctuated in recent decades by an increased sedentary lifestyle, which can accelerate physical decline [18]. Thus, many activities that individuals engage in when they are younger may be less viable as they age. For example, someone who enjoyed fly-fishing or rock climbing when they were younger may find that they are no longer able to do the physical actions necessary to fully participate in those activities. Clinically, older adults with hoarding disorder often report wanting to keep items that remind them of their past. Adults with normative levels of object attachment may experience a similar feeling; the older adult who can no longer go on fly-fishing expeditions may feel an urge to hold onto their fishing gear as a reminder of past trips.

A declining ability to engage in physical activity can also affect older men's perception of their own masculinity [19], which can be integral to older men's sense of independence [20]. Thus, older men may desire to hold on to objects that remind them of their past physicality. Objects that used to merely serve a functional purpose may begin to have additional meaning for the owner. For example, an 80-year old man may no longer be able to safely use a chainsaw, but having it displayed in his work shed may remind him of the years he heated his house with wood he cut himself. Thus, certain objects may come to be perceived as a necessary extension of the self; attachment to and retention of those items may be protective of aging individuals' sense of independence and self-efficacy.

Executive functioning

In addition to changes in physical functioning, decline in certain domains of cognitive functioning is an

inevitable consequence of aging. With regards to object attachment, the most relevant cognitive domain to decline with advancing age is executive functioning [21]. Executive functioning has been linked to pathological levels of object attachment generally [22] and in older adults specifically [23]. Of the subdomains of executive functioning, inhibition and set-shifting are most likely to be affected by age [21] and are also most significantly associated with increases in object hoarding [22]. Thus, as adults age they may be less able to engage in decision making about which objects they should keep or discard. Furthermore, attachment to a possession increases over time, regardless of hoarding tendencies [6]. Normative increases in attachment over time may interact with increased executive dysfunction to result in an enhanced confirmation bias effect in which older adults experience heightened levels of normative object attachment. Older adults who have held on to a possession for several decades (i.e. who have repeatedly made the decision to keep the item) may find that not only is it more difficult to discard due to increased difficulties with decision making, but that their past behavior of keeping the item has heightened their perceived emotional attachment to the object. For example, an older woman who hung a nondescript painting in her home when she was younger may find that not only does she feel more attached to the artwork over time due to increased familiarity but also that making the decision of whether to throw it away becomes harder over time; thus, she defaults to assuming that her earlier decisions (to keep the art) were correct.

Conclusion

Much of the literature on object attachment occurs very early in life and on attachment style throughout childhood and adolescence. Although multiple factors may impact attachment to objects across the lifespan, available empirical literature is restricted to an examination of pathological object attachment (i.e. late life hoarding). Thus, we can only speculate on the presentation and predictive factors of normative object attachment in non-hoarding older adults. There are multiple life events and transitions (e.g. loss of a loved one, retirement, and downsizing) that could impact attachments to objects as we grow older. Object attachment related to beliefs about memory and sentimental feelings toward objects is likely to increase with age; however, there is not yet empirical research to support this theoretical model of aging and object attachment. Findings of future research on object attachment in late life could inform various interventions in areas such as adjustment, grief, trauma, and hoarding. Finally, given that there are individual differences in the discussed factors, there is likely not a one size fits all model of the effect of age on normative object attachment.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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