

## MATERIALISM IN THE HOME: THE IMPACT OF ARTIFACTS ON DYADIC COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT -

This paper examines the issue of materialism as it affects communication in dyadic relationships. Couples engaged in significant relationships were researched to determine what types of domestic artifacts were important to their relationship. These artifacts were identified according to four criteria and classified as historical, ancestral, fraternal, or developmental. Conclusions were then drawn regarding the nature of dyadic communication.

### INTRODUCTION

In the field of communication, little research has been done on the nonverbal elements of the home environment, dormitories, offices and public places are all environments which have been analyzed from a communication perspective (e.g., Festinger, Schacter, & Back, 1950; Ruesch & Kees, 1956; Mehrabian, 1976). However, communication in the home, with regard to the environmental effects on relationships has remained untouched by scholars in communication.

The intent of this research is to study artifacts in the home and their effect on relational communication. It will identify patterns of communication of permanent and semi-permanent male/female relationships. The study will seek to determine what implications nonverbal artifacts have in defining and maintaining relationships. Based on a descriptive approach, the study will attempt to answer the question, "How do artifacts in the home reflect relationships?"

Individuals perceive their physical setting as filled with personal meaning. Holahan (1978, p. 127) refers to the process of shaping, reconstructing and organizing the environment into constructs of personal meaning as environmental schematization. This process corresponds to social communication. Every physical environment is embedded in and inextricably related to a social system. Physical settings define and structure characteristic patterns of human behavior. An important way in which physical settings can influence the behaviors which take place in them is through the symbolic meanings which communicators have for them. In its most obvious sense, an environment has symbolic meaning because the purposes and the activities that go on in it have been socially defined (Ittleson, Proshansky, Rivlin, & Winkel, 1974, p. 9). Human experiences are so complex that people are forced to summarize them. One way of producing these summaries is by means of symbols, which often take the form of a visual representation (Wohl & Strauss, 1958).

This study will focus on symbolic objects within the home environment called artifacts. To begin, artifacts will be defined as inanimate objects which represent human experience and which have special significance to an individual or individuals in a relationship.

One place to begin looking for artifacts is in the home. Certainly the home depicts the uniqueness and individuality of its occupants, their personal identity as individuals and as a family. People often decorate their homes to make themselves distinct from others (Altman & Gauvain, 1981). Cooper recognizes this identity factor in homes, "The furniture we install, the way we arrange it, the pictures we hang, the plants we buy and tend, all are messages about ourselves that we want to convey back to ourselves, and to the few intimates that we invite into our house, (1976, p. 135)." Identity is achieved through artifacts. The images people try to create in their homes are accomplished by the use of artifacts.

The majority of research tone has centered on the ways the individuals relate to artifacts. This research provides an important foundation for research of a specific nature. The present study will explore artifacts of the environment as they relate to individuals who are members of Permanent or semi-permanent relationships.

Two studies have considered the influence of artifacts on the individual. An early study by Hansen and Altman (1976) measured the decorating of personal places and devised a content analysis system of seven categories of personalization: personal relationships, values, abstract, reference, entertainment, personal interest, and gross/total space. The early study was done in dormitory rooms, as was a refined study by Vinsel, Brown, Altman, & Foss (1980) who divided artifacts of decoration into forty-five categories. A content analysis was then done on these categories to determine success in school are regulation of privacy. These categories provide the framework of artifacts this study seeks to define relationally. This study will not conform to the limitations of these categories, but will instead try to expand the concept of artifact as it relates to communication. Once artifacts have been defined, this study will seek to determine the nature of publicly displayed artifacts in the homes of young married, older marrieds and unmarried couples with respect to ownership. Finally, this study will analyze the communication which occurs as a result of the artifacts.

This study proposes to answer three questions: (1) What objects publicly displayed in the home can be identified as artifacts? (2) Are these artifacts of an individual or relational nature? (3) To what extent do these artifacts reflect the communication in the relationship?

## METHOD

Six male/female pairs were interviewed in order to study the development of relationships as reflected by artifacts, and to determine the effect of the contractual marriage agreement on the process. Interviewed were two couples married for over thirty-five years, two couples married less than five years, and two unmarried couples living together. Research participants were selected on the basis of availability and willingness to be interviewed. Each couple owned or rented a single-family dwelling on generally large lots.

Data were collected in unstructured personal interviews with the couples in their homes. To gain more information about their relationship, the interviewer asked couples what they talked about while they were together in each room. Couples were allowed to direct the tour and give any information they thought relevant about their home. All interviews were recorded on cassette

tape and transcribed. Transcriptions were then analyzed to determine what objects were referred to, and what properties or characteristics these objects had in common. These characteristics were then used to formulate a detailed definition of an artifact. Objects defined as artifacts were then classified according to devised types of artifacts. The data were then analyzed according to the classification system and conclusions drawn.

### YOUNG MARRIED COUPLES

Young married couples tend to display and identify objects which typically meet the initial definition of artifacts. The majority of the objects identified were small, personal items which reflected the past experiences of the couple as a married unit. Photographs and albums were common artifacts. Both couples remarked that they have a lot of pictures around and that they spend time reminiscing with their albums. Individual pictures were also displayed throughout the homes, usually depicting an important occasion in the relationship of the couple, such as their first picture taken together.

Another type of artifact in this class were the gifts which they had received from each other. Artifacts which were gifts were often the first artifacts which had been acquired together, such as wedding gifts. These artifacts indirectly validated the couple as an official unit and were displayed to strengthen the stability of the relationship. Few artifacts were from the time before the couple was married.

A second class of artifacts identified by young married couples represented other people in their lives, such as family and friends. Objects which had sentimental meaning were also important.

The artifacts which the young married couples described individually were usually personal or gender-related items, such as toilet articles or gifts which had been given to just one member of the couple, often by the other. Collections were another type of artifact that was described as having individual ownership.

The young married couples discussed artifacts which aid in planning or which are future oriented. Planning most frequently occurs in the kitchen and bedroom. In the kitchen one couple agreed, "This is probably where we talk the most." Another remarked, "When we have breakfast in here, we talk about what we're going to do during the day, and sit and figure out what we're going to do the rest of the day." The bedroom is also used as a setting for planning, either in reviewing the day's activities or by planning the activities of the following day: "We talk about what we did during the day, 'How was work, school?' 'How way your day?'" Much of the verbal communication that occurs between young married couples is future oriented, as they share dreams and plan together for the future.

In general, most of the artifacts identified by the young married couples had relational significance, pertinent to their married lives. Couples identified photographs, gifts, and hand made artifacts as being especially meaningful artifacts in their homes.

### OLDER MARRIED COUPLES

Couples who have been married for long periods of time took genuine pride in the fact that they owned a home. The information surrounding the building and/or purchase of the home and how long they had owned it were facts the couples were anxious to share. When asked to describe each room, the first objects older married couples would mention would be the major, functional things in the home, not paying attention to detail. In the kitchen one man remarked, "I think the most important thing is the refrigerator number one, and then the range, the sink, and our clock." In the bedroom he said, "I guess the most important thing here would be the beds." When asked to describe the basement he listed the major items like the washer, dryer, freezer and fruit room, ignoring other artifacts there might have been. Minimal description was given of any of these artifacts.

Each item the older married couple mentioned had a story surrounding its acquisition. Even the smaller articles, such as decorations and knick-knacks, had some story behind them. usually reflecting a common experience.

Several of their artifacts reminded them of someone, usually a family member or friend. These older couples also displayed a great number of pictures of children and grandchildren. The couples were eager to talk about their children and mentioned artifacts given to them by or reminding them of their children or grandchildren. These older married people admitted that a great deal of their conversations were about the lives of their children and grandchildren, rather than about their own lives.

In one home nearly all of the artifacts were concentrated in the living room. The memories of the people and events in their lives were so important to them that the wife remarked, "We just keep memories in here, really." That couple designated an entire room to display artifacts in order to remember important people and events in their lives.

Older married couples adopted stereotypical sex roles. One woman said, "I'm in the house most of the time," and her husband replied, "I'm in the yard most of the time." This caused the couples to admit that they talked infrequently: "Very seldom do we talk about anything," or "We don't talk, he sleeps." Both older married couples were retired. Even though they had much time during the day to converse, they rarely spoke to each other. One woman noted that talking to others was more important for her husband, "He talks to the men in the neighborhood more. He's out there, all the men around here are retired, they get together and he talks." This comment may reflect a decreased need for verbal communication between the couple.

For these older married couples, outside noise sources, such as television, radio and the stereo, were very important. In the living room they noted, "We spend lots of hours in this room, we have our television, our stereo. If we don't like what's on TV, we just turn on the stereo. The continual use of outside noise sources in all major rooms further indicates the decreased need for verbal communication with these couples.

## UNMARRIED COUPLES

Unmarried couples who live together tend to identify the functional objects in a room before any sentimental or personal items. As they went through the house, they pointed out the bed in the bedroom; the stereo, couches, and tables in the living room; the refrigerator and stove in the kitchen, etc. The largest number of objects in their homes were separate artifacts, belonging specifically to one member of the relationship and identified as such, "Our books are kind of vaguely separated both by ownership and subject. His are on this side, and mine are on that side." This separation of artifacts may indicate the relative level of stability in the relationship.

Each member of the couple also had a separate room in different parts of the house, filled with their own individual artifacts. Personal artifacts, such as pictures of families, toys, and other memorabilia were kept separate in these individual rooms. These personal artifacts had meaning solely for the individual and were displayed where only a single member of the relationship would typically see them. Clothing was also kept separated, in separate closets and even in separate rooms. This division of personal belongings reflects an individual nature about the relationship.

## DISCUSSION

These six couples had several things in common, things which span both time and contractual agreement. The first things the couples would describe in a room would be the superlatives: "The oldest thing in the room is the wicker couch;" "The frog is probably the oldest thing here;" "This is the first picture we took together the first time we went to Lagoon. . . ." All couples used a primacy pattern of organization in describing objects in a room.

These couples also shared a common interest in their lawns and gardens. In that sense, their conversations are specific to their environment. However, few other rooms in the house were topic specific.

Many differences could be recorded about the artifacts that each set of couples had. Young married couples had the most items which they identified as artifacts. Older married couples either have fewer artifacts or have them concentrated in a single room or area. Most of the objects in the homes of unmarried couples are functional in nature and don't reflect common experiences of the relationship.

## DEFINITION OF AN ARTIFACT

Initially, this study was formulated to discover what constituted an artifact in a relationship. Findings from this research suggest that different objects can be artifacts for different sets of people, and all objects publicly displayed in the home are not necessarily artifacts. Specifically, people create the meaning of an artifact; for without meaning attached to it an object symbolizes little beyond its intended function. An artifact is characterized as such by the individual or couple and not by the observer. Therefore, an outside observer could not enter a home and merely code objects as artifacts without gathering relevant communication from the occupants of the home

about the objects and their particular significance. Thus, communication about an object is necessary to determine its identity as an artifact.

Based on this research, four qualities appear to characterize an artifact. The first quality which distinguishes an artifact from a mere object is its origin. An object must have personal significance for an individual or couple. Some important issues to consider when looking at an artifact's origin are from where the artifact came, when it was acquired, how it was acquired, and from whom it was acquired. The stories included in the descriptions of objects generally revealed one or more of these details and made the object significant to the couple. It was not necessarily the object which was important, but the fact that it symbolically represented a significant occasion.

The second important quality to consider is the present function of the object. It is important to determine the purpose of the object as it is displayed or used in the home. In order to be artifactual in nature, the object must have symbolic representation beyond its functional nature.

The third quality of artifacts relates to their non-routine nature of experience. Initially, artifacts were defined as representing human experience. However, this study has shown that not all objects which represent human experience are necessarily artifacts. The nonroutine or special nature of experiencing an object, such as the birth of a child or a first communion, represented by a plaque or certificate, is more likely to result in characterizing it as an artifact.

The final quality which characterized an object as an artifact is its being centered outside the couple. Artifacts may represent an extra-couple relationship, that is, a social system outside the couple's relationship. These artifacts represent people who are related to the couple or friends important to the couple. For example, photographs can be such artifacts because they represent relationships outside the couple. Older married couples often display pictures of their children and grandchildren. Part of the significance of the object, then, is represented by the relationship which the object signifies.

#### CLASSIFICATION OF ARTIFACTS

This study was able to classify artifacts into four types: historical, ancestral, fraternal, and developmental. Historical artifacts are those which represent a particular time or event in the lives of people, individually or as a couple. Ancestral artifacts represent specific family members, such as a picture or some other object given as a remembrance. Fraternal artifacts are those which people display to represent friends and other acquaintances who are not related to the occupants of the home. Developmental artifacts are those which symbolize important stages in the development of the couple's relationship. Historical, ancestral and fraternal artifacts can be either individual or relational in nature. But developmental artifacts can characterize only the relationship.

Table 1 delineates the total number of artifacts and their proportional contribution to the representative classes, identified by each type of couple. The total number of artifacts is given with proportional relations to the total number of artifacts identified by the couples.

**TABLE 1**  
**Types of Artifacts**

	Young Married	Older Married	Unmarried	Overall
Historical	35(59%)	9(15%)	15(37%)	59(33%)
Ancestral	26(39%)	34(51%)	7(10%)	67(37%)
Fraternal	9(39%)	2( 9%)	12(52%)	23(13%)
Developmental	8(27%)	15(50%)	7(23%)	30(17%)
Total	78(44%)	60(34%)	41(23%)	179(100%)

Historical artifacts are those which are most common for young married couples. This could demonstrate their need to artificially create a mutual history by displaying artifacts which represent important historical events. In essence, they are a shortcut to relational development. While these objects may be of little practical significance, their importance is elevated by the couple to represent great events in the couple's history. Older married couples have the fewest historical artifacts because they have spent so much of their lives together and an actual history of their relationship already exists. Those historical artifacts displayed tend to reflect later experiences in their relationship. This may be partially due to the durability of the articles. Thus, only those artifacts which represent the most important events in the history of their relationship are displayed. Unmarried couples have a proportionally high number of historical artifacts, but not nearly as many as young married couples. The fact that there is no contractual agreement between the members of the unmarried couples is reflected in their artifacts.

The historical artifacts these couple display do not represent significant events in the history of the relationship, but reflect events significant to the individual. Since these couples are young, they have no great history behind them, and still have the need to create some history.

Family values are extremely important to married couples. This is represented by the significant proportion of ancestral artifacts in the homes of both the young and older married couples. Older married couples have more ancestral artifacts because their artifacts represent both forebearers and descendants. Younger married couples have fewer ancestral artifacts because they only have forebearers. For these young married couples, the marital union represents family, and they try to establish and maintain family values through their artifacts. Extremely few ancestral artifacts were displayed in the homes of unmarried couples. Since the marital contract is the bond which

creates families and because these couples don't have this bond, it would be expected that they would not hold family values in such high esteem.

However, unmarried couples display the largest proportion of fraternal artifacts. In fact, over half of the fraternal artifacts displayed by the six couples belonged to these couples. Since these couples have few family connections and no descendants as a result of the relationship, those relationships most important to them are of their friends, and the artifacts they display reflect this value. Young married couples also displayed a significant proportion of fraternal artifacts, though not as many as the unmarried couples. Because their relationship is a new one, they still maintain important extra-couple relationships, which are reflected by their fraternal artifacts. Older married couples displayed relatively few fraternal artifacts. Because family values and artifacts are so important to these couples, it would seem that the importance of fraternal artifacts dwindles over time and as the family grows.

Older married couples displayed half of the developmental artifacts. These artifacts become, in essence, extensions and products of the relationship. Over time, these couples have collected things which are relationally significant. The development of their relationship has many milestones, represented by their developmental artifacts. Young married and unmarried couples had approximately the same proportion of developmental artifacts, reflecting the fact that their relationships have developed for approximately the same amount of time.

Overall, the young married couples had the most artifacts, followed by the older married couples. The unmarried couples had the fewest total number of artifacts of any of the types of couples. These facts suggest that the contractual agreement indicates a greater need for the public display of artifacts, to create a measure of stability and permanence in the relationship. It is important to realize that the four artifact classes determined by this study can overlap, and that artifacts may represent more than one category.

#### INDIVIDUAL VERSUS RELATIONAL

The manner in which a couple describes an object signifies whether it hold individual or relational significance. Table 2 shows the frequency of individual versus relational descriptions of objects among the couples.

**TABLE 2**  
**References of Object Ownership**

	Young Married	Older Married	Unmarried
Relational	67(65%)	35(63%)	23(30%)
Individual	36(35%)	21(37%)	53(70%)

Artifacts can reflect the nature of relationships. The total number of individual artifacts displayed by unmarried couples is greater than the number of relational artifacts displayed by either the young married or older married couples. Ownership is an important characteristic to these couples. They referred to their artifacts using the singular pronouns "me" and "my," which indicates a need to make a personal statement about the identity of the relationship suggesting a sense of individuality within the confines of commitment.

The proportions of relational and individual objects are almost identical in both young and older married couples. Nearly two-thirds of all objects mentioned were relational, described using plural pronouns such as "we" and "our." Very few individual artifacts of prominence remained from the days when the couple was single, and these must hold great significance in order to be displayed.

While the historical artifacts of unmarried couples reflected an individual's history, the historical artifacts of young and older married couples reflected their relational history. The marriage contract constrains or subjugates the individual, and the individual is inhibited by the relational nature of the artifacts displayed. This cycle continues for the duration of the marriage and is reflected by all four classes of artifacts.

#### ARTIFACTS AND COMMUNICATION

Artifacts serve two functions in the communication in dyadic relationships. Artifacts create a setting for communication, and they serve to reflect the relational communication which occurs between the couples.

One way artifacts create a setting for communication is by defining behavior and dictating the type and location of interaction, such as when planning functions are carried out where facilities direct. Frequently, interaction is determined by the placement of particular artifacts, usually functional in nature. Eating is one such behavior determined by the location of certain artifacts. Both young married couples spent meal time in the living room in front of the television set in order to watch M\*A\*S\*H. One older married couple admitted that they talked about "old times, where we worked, different things," in their living room. For them, this was the room which contained most of their artifacts. These artifacts, representing the past, reflected the general topic of conversation while in that room.

The second function artifacts serve is to reflect the relational communication which occurs between the couple. This communication can be both verbal and nonverbal. In one sense, the placement of artifacts may serve as a reflection or judgment about the relationship. Young married couples placed relational artifacts in places of honor, while individual artifacts occupied these same places in the homes of unmarried couples.

Artifacts provide a definition of relationship for the couple as well as for others entering their home by symbolizing important elements of the relationship. Artifacts communicate intended and unintended messages to the individuals and outsiders, depending on how it is perceived.

In another sense, artifacts may substitute for verbal communication between the couple. For example, older married couples communicate much more infrequently than either the young married or unmarried couples. After maintaining a relationship for thirty-five years, perhaps there is not as much need to exchange information with one another since most of their lifetime experiences happened while they were together.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the data gathered, I propose the following six conclusions about the nature of artifacts:

(1) Artifacts of young married couples reflect a future-directed orientation

Even though the young married couples displayed the greatest proportion of historical artifacts, their communication was very future oriented. As would be expected for couples who have most of their lives ahead of them, much of their communication reflected future plans and goals, while many of their artifacts reflected their brief past history together.

(2) Artifacts of older married couples reflect a past-directed orientation.

Couples married for over thirty-five years are generally nearing the end of their lives. This would cause them to tend to romanticize the lives that they have lead and might make them attempt to relive the past. Much of the communication of older couples centers on their past experiences, and their artifacts predominantly reflect these past experiences. Couples have children and grandchildren as extensions of themselves, so they have the lives of several people to discuss and reflect upon.

Conversation which deals with the day-to-day maintenance of the relationship is sufficient, and the need for that is minimal since couples are so familiar with the characteristics of each other. Hence, older married couples seldom communicate about the present. Future-oriented conversation is also limited since the couples assume the future will be similar to the present. Goals and dreams have already been reached or dismissed as impossible, so speculation about the future has little relevance in their communication. Older married couples don't have the need to display as many artifacts as young married couples because they have created their own history by sharing a lifetime of experiences together. This history can be understood by examining the objects they display.

(3) Artifacts of unmarried couples living together reflect a present-directed orientation.

The homes of unmarried couples primarily display individual artifacts. These artifacts create an environment in which couples tend to discuss themselves as individuals, as opposed to partners, in a relationship. Because of the nature of their relationship, they have little to say about past common experiences and presumably, would each have individual goals for the future. These couples, then, communicate mainly about the present. The responsibilities for housekeeping duties are carefully separated, and most of their energies are spent on short-term interests.

(4) Young married couples display artifacts projecting values they seek to acquire.

Many of the artifacts displayed by young married couples are from their parents and grandparents. It can be tentatively proposed that one of the reasons these artifacts are displayed is to represent elements of either that person or a relationship which the couple wishes to emulate. The reason the artifact is displayed, then, is to remind the couple of values they wish to acquire.

(5) Older married couples use artifacts as a substitute for communication and maintain their relationships with a minimum of verbal communication.

Admittedly, older married couples communicated less with each other than either of the other two types of couples. Outside noise sources, radio, television, stereo, some of which are artifacts, occupied much of their waking time and could be a substitute for verbal communication between them. Because these couples have been communicating for a number of years, there is little new information to share with each other without becoming repetitive. They have established familiar patterns of behavior which require minimal verbal communication to maintain. Since the outlook for the future of the relationship is the same as the present, there is little new in the relationship to discuss.

(6) Artifacts displayed by unmarried couples living together represent a statement of individual independence within the relationship.

Table 2, indicating references of objects' ownership, demonstrated that the bulk of artifacts in the homes of the unmarried couples living together were of an individual nature. The mere fact that these individual artifacts were displayed without major significance to the other member of the couple implies a tone of independence within the context of the relationship. Furthermore, the first thing both unmarried couples did upon reaching the bedroom was to acknowledge the bed, as if to validate their relationship sexually. This mix of individual and relationship artifacts indicates that the relationship is more than a relationship of convenience, but one which allows the couple to maintain a dual identity while enjoying an intimate relationship. These artifacts show that the couple is more than just a relational unit, that they are individuals leading individual lives within a relational unit

Obviously, there are many limitations to any preliminary study, and even the conclusions which are drawn are tentative. The number of subjects used in this study was limited, as was the geographical areas from which the data were collected. Certain cultural areas hold different values and beliefs which should be identified and recognized.

Though the current study suffers many limitations, it has served to clarify a number of issues with respect to the relationship between artifacts and communication. By allowing couples to control the interview, the interviewer was more likely to maximize the possible types of artifacts identified and probe their relevance to relationships. A workable definition of artifacts was formulated and a preliminary classification system was developed. Now that the term artifact has been more accurately defined and classified, future research should be able to recognize,

categorize, and analyze artifacts and their potential effects on a number of variables to further the understanding of the environment.

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