Disposition of Possessions During Role Transitions

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ABSTRACT - The functions of acquisition, usage, and disposition of possessions during role transitions and processes of identity reconstruction have been given little or no scrutiny in previous research either within or outside of consumer behavior literature. This study reports the effects of possession disposition preceding, during, and following role transitions. Evidence presented here indicates that possession disposition is employed to facilitate or validate both role and status changes-enhancing and solidifying new self-concepts and social role identities.

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All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel,
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his Mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. Then a justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Seeking the bubble reputation
And so he plays his part. The sixth stage shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose well sa'd a world too wide
ABSTRACT

The functions of acquisition, usage, and disposition of possessions during role transitions and processes of identity reconstruction have been given little or no scrutiny in previous research either within or outside of consumer behavior literature. This study reports the effects of possession disposition preceding, during, and following role transitions. Evidence presented here indicates that possession disposition is employed to facilitate or validate both role and status changes-enhancing and solidifying new self-concepts and social role identities.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace when discussing role transitions to borrow dramaturgic metaphors. "Role transitions" is itself a dramaturgic metaphor; a phrase taken from theater to describe the passage from one social status (or social role) to another (e.g., Banton 1965; Benedict 1938; Glaser and Strauss 1971; Goffman 1959; Levinson 1978; Sarbin 1954; Sarbin and Allen 1968; Sheehy 1974; von Gennep 1909/1965). Interpreting human behavior as theater provides concepts that are useful in analyzing our real-life plot structures.

By using dramaturgic role concepts, one eschews mechanistic causality since roles are relevant only in the context of persons enacting multiple, reciprocal roles. Thus, a conceptual paper that begins with Shakespeare's proposition that: "All the world's a stage..." relies on a world view other than simple mechanistic causality. Instead, I emphasize contextualism, mutual shaping, change, and the functions of possessions in assisting such change. First, I discuss the variety of contexts within which human behavior occurs. These are often referred to as the social systems, or plays, we participate in. Next I consider the roles, or parts, our plays need. Then I discuss the scripts, or normative and anticipatory expectations, that our roles require. Finally, I present my core thesis: namely, that the props, or possessions, which we acquire, use, and (especially) dispose of are necessary for--successful transitions from one role to another--both within and across the plays, parts, and scripts which we enact.

SOCIAL SYSTEMS

"PLAYS"

Role transitions refer to "life changes" involving social roles associated with social systems. Social systems are often referred to as social structures. However, I prefer the term "social system" to the term "social structure," since the former emphasizes our ever-changing lives, whereas the latter implies status-role invariance (e.g., Goffman 1961, 1974; Linton 1936). Using our dramaturgic metaphor, social systems are the plays we participate in. Although these social systems may justifiably be conceived as the cultures and subcultures within which we function (act), I prefer to conceptualize social systems as day-to-day social (theatrical) stages--convoluted, changing, imperfect, and dependent on symbolic communication (e.g., Buchmann 1989; Hess 1988; Sorensen, Weinert, and Sherrod 1986). Consistent with my conceptualization, all social systems--plays--require social roles--parts.

SOCIAL ROLES

"PARTS"

No dramaturgic metaphor has had wider acceptance in transition literature than the metaphor of the social role, or part. A role is defined as a behavior pattern associated with a particular person in a particular social system (e.g., Linton 1945; Oswalt 1986; Spierer 1981). Concepts of self-identity (and social identity) have an important place in our theoretical framework (e.g., Mead 1934; Sarbin 1954; Young 1965). Our social roles imply action--action constrained by the associated statuses of our parts in our social system's scripts. The imagery evoked by the metaphor "role" is that of humans--actors and actresses--operating in a social system termed a theater. To rephrase, social roles (parts) in social systems (plays) have normative and anticipatory role expectations (scripts).

ROLE EXPECTATIONS

"SCRIPTS"

In performing a social role--a part--an actor or actress follows an actual or imagined dramatic script. The script contains normative and anticipatory role expectations that define both role behavior and interactions between roles. Role expectations--scripts--are commonly presumed to offer precise formulae for role behavior. To the contrary, several variables influence the form and quality of any role enactment. First, actors and actresses freely choose between modified roles, stereotyped roles, and created roles. Next, actors and actresses possess limited artistic license to determine exactly how they will enact a script, and no two performances are ever alike. Actors and actresses perform as if all the world's a stage or, as Oliver Wendell Holmes restates:

The world's a stage--as Shakespeare said, one day;

The stage a world--was what he meant to say.

To rephrase, scripts are interactional guidelines, and actors and actresses are not merely passive participants; but instead, they are active monitors of others' reactions, and they continually modify their performances to fit each audience.

The above conceptualization is the traditional dramaturgic interpretation of role theoretic frameworks. It borrows the terms "plays," "parts," and "roles" from dramaturgy; substituting them for the abstract language of role theory that relies on terms like "social systems," "social roles," and "role expectations." Yet, role theory, as it is typically described in anthropology, psychology, and sociology fails to incorporate "props"--one of the most common dramaturgic terms. This is of particular importance to the discipline of consumer behavior because the functions of possessions, or props, are mentioned by few scholars in regard to social role transitions (e.g., Andreasen 1984; McAlexander and Schouten 1989; Schouten 1990). Thus, I propose that extant conceptualizations of role theoretic frameworks are incorrect in overlooking the importance of props and I strive to illustrate how possessions--props--affect roles and role transitions.
The term "props" literally means stage property. "Props" potentially may include virtually anything on stage, although we usually confine the term "props" to moveable, but inanimate objects. In other words, people and pets usually are not considered to be props (although they might be in a particular play). More commonly, possessions, or "props," include objects such as furniture, costumes, and decorations that facilitate, validate, and support plays, parts, and scripts.

For instance, consider the impact of the tops hats in the musical, A Chorus Line, written by James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante, directed by Michael Bennett, produced by Joseph Papp in 1975, and conducted on an essentially bare stage with essentially forgettable costumes. From the opening act to the final scene, the hats, one of the few props, provide the focal point for the entire musical. Such is often the importance of possessions, or "props," in both dramaturgy and real life. The house we live in, the car we drive, and the clothes we wear have long been recognized as symbols of "who we are."

ROLE TRANSITIONS

Thus far, I have discussed plays, parts, scripts, and props as though they were permanent entities--a perspective that is relatively true within the field of dramaturgy. Yet, using a role theoretic perspective, social systems, roles, role enactments, and possessions are continually changing. The most common term for these changes is "role transitions." The four most common role transitions across all cultures are: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. However, employing a broader definition, role transitions may include: leaving parents; graduating from school; accepting a job; getting married; having children; moving; changing jobs; getting divorced; retiring; or having a spouse die. In an abstract sense, role transitions emanate from: work and financial changes; changes in home life; losses of relationships; and personal or inner changes (e.g., Bridges 1980; Fried and Fried 1980; George 1980). Von Gennep (1909/1965), in his research on rites of passage, depicts a role transition as a liminal phase--a period when a person is disconnected from a former role or status, but not yet connected to a new role or status. Turner (1974) identifies four stages in role transitions. First is a breach of custom, when the person engages in conduct that violates traditional norms. Following this breach of custom is a time of crisis or role strain; not unlike the vulnerability, profound inner conflict, and crises that are depicted by Adams, Hayes, and Hopkins (1976). Next is a period of regressive or adaptive action, during which the person strives to reduce the disharmony similar to the findings of Howson and Adams (1973). The last phase is either reintegratio into the former role or separation into a new role. There are several classifications of role and status transitions. Holmes and Rahe (1967) developed a list of life events that pose challenges to people. Their "Schedule of Recent Events" shows the potential interface between social stress and adjustment to role transitions. The ten most stressful events--all of which represent role transitions are: (1) death of spouse; (2) divorce; (3) marital separation; (4) jail term; (5) death of close family member; (6) personal injury or illness; (7) marriage; (8) fired from work; (9) marital reconciliation; and (10) retirement. This is merely one example of a classificatory system for role and status transitions. Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1974) compiled the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Interview (PERI scale) a list of 102 life events that are potentially stressful--many of which are role transitions--and calibrated the amount of impact entailed in each type of event. Again, this is merely another example of a classificatory system for role and status transitions and should not be perceived to be better or worse than any other classificatory system.

Now let us return to dramaturgic metaphors to detail a hypothetical example of a role transition. To refresh our memories, we claimed that "plays" (social systems) require "parts" (roles). As we attempt to enact the parts in our plays, we rely upon "scripts" (role and status expectations) and "props" (possessions) to guide our behavior and communicate social positions. Role transitions demand changes in the "plays" (social systems), the "parts" (roles), the "scripts" (role expectations), and the "props" (possessions) in our lives.

For example, a woman may participate in a "play" called "marriage." This play may require enactment of a "role" termed "wife." This "role" might involve a "script" that includes role-determined expectations such as earning an income, bearing children, and sharing in household decision-making. This "script" may be enhanced by "props" that include a house, a car, and clothes. An abrupt role transition may occur if the woman's spouse dies. The "play" is no longer called "marriage;" now it is called "widowhood," and involves enactment of a role termed "widow." This "role" might demand a new "script" that includes role-determined expectations such as earning a larger income, raising children alone, and making household decisions alone. Finally, this "script" may be accompanied by a change in the "props." The new widow may sell the family home, remove her wedding band, or donate the decedent's clothing to charity. Such possession dispositions--or prop changes--usually facilitate social and psychological adjustment to the new "play," "part," "script," and "props" (i.e., the role transition). In a detailed study of widowhood, Lopata (1973a) maintains that widowhood is a social role that represents a major role loss because the normative guidelines and role privileges of being a spouse are lost and the widow is left with few guidelines and role privileges. In many societies, these customs include destroying, giving away, or temporarily putting aside personal property of the deceased, observing a taboo on the name of the deceased, and changing residence. We believe...such customs serve to break ties with the deceased spouse and, as a consequence, to facilitate establishment of new patterns of living...

However, it is important to emphasize that not all life changes--even the death of a spouse--are always role transitions. The determination of what should be defined as a role transition is dependent on the emic perspective of the focal person. If a life change affects a social role, it is most appropriately termed a role transition. In contrast, if a life change has little or no impact on a social role, it does not warrant definition as a role transition--an important type of change which strongly influences behavior and social identity. In other words, some attributes of identity encompassed by roles are very central to self, and as a consequence are imbued with strong affect (e.g., Levinson 1959; Sarbin 1982; Turner 1974). Loss of such roles may have devastating consequences (e.g., Marris 1974; Parkes 1986; Stephenson 1985). For example, the centrality of the role of wife for some women is indicated by grief, mourning, or despair following the death of a spouse. In contrast, the role of wife may be peripheral to self for other women, and can be lost or abandoned with little or no distress (e.g., Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1974; Goffman 1959; Viorst 1986).

METHOD

The findings presented in this research are based on depth interviews with 52 student informants (ages 19 to 39, 60 percent female). All informants were requested to discuss the disposition of four possessions--yielding data for 208 dispositional experiences. The interviews were unstructured, non-directive, and guided by the informant style and the unique informant/interviewer interaction. This method was considered most appropriate for the objectives of this research since it evokes richly textured descriptions of dispositional experiences which otherwise
might be dismissed or overlooked. Interviews were tape-recorded, and required from 45 minutes to over 2 hours to complete. The tape recordings were then transcribed, resulting in an accumulation of over 700 transcribed pages of data regarding the disposition of all types of possessions. Transcripts were analyzed to isolate examples of possession disposition during role transitions.

Content analysis is an excellent method to generate a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and “thick interpretation” (Denzin 1989) because it explores the phenomenology of verbatim self-reports. This method prioritizes discovery over confirmation (e.g., Deshpande 1983; Kaplan 1984; Lincoln and Guba 1985), and is particularly appropriate because of the paucity of dispositional research. Also, this method of data analysis is consistent with the call for more naturalistic, experiential approaches to consumer behavior research (e.g., Belk 1984a; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

**EXAMPLES OF POSSESSION DISPOSITION DURING ROLE TRANSITIONS**

I emphasize the disposition of possessions (props) during role transitions, which is not to ignore the importance of the acquisition and usage of such props, but merely to define the bounds of this research—part of a much larger project on possession disposition. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this research is the fact that 100 of the 208 interviews (48 percent) concerned a possession disposition that either represented a role transition itself (e.g., quitting a job), or occurred in conjunction with a role transition (e.g., selling a house because quitting a job). This single percentage reveals the close relationship between possession disposition and role transitions. Possessions, or props, are not disposed of on whims—they are carefully calculated maneuvers that facilitate and validate role transitions. Whether such maneuvers are performed consciously or subconsciously, they allow individuals “to throw out the old to make room for the new.” In contrast, when possession disposition is involuntary, it may create abrupt or uncomfortable role strain as the supporting props are removed. On the following pages, I present interview excerpts of dispositional stories that precede, occur in conjunction with, represent, or follow role transitions. Since most of the informants are young adults, most dispositional stories involve role transitions appropriate to this age group.

Consider the following quote from Steven (WM 20), who gave up his blanket to facilitate his role transition from “baby” to “child” (I = Interviewer):

S: [W]hen I was little I had a security blanket that I grew up with. I had had it since I was a baby and slept with it every night. Then when I was about seven or eight, I decided I had to get rid of it. None of my friends had anything like that and I knew I was too old for it....I decided I was a big boy now and it was time to get rid of childish things.

Consider the following interview quote from Liz (WF 20), who voluntarily gave her car to her brother to validate her role transition from "young rebel" to "mature adult:"

L:...I just gave [the car] to [my brother] when he left for college.
I: You didn’t care about the old car?
L: No. I associated it with a party car, so actually I was kind of glad to get rid of it. It was during my rebellious stage where I took off for weekends snow skiing and things without telling my parents, kind of just like leaving, so in a way it was to get rid of the bad things I did so it didn’t bother me. I think I was relieved I got rid of those memories. I got rid of the bad things I had done. It signified that I don’t do these things now. I’m older now and don’t deceive my parents. That car was like a symbol of all the deceitful things I had done to my parents and to my family when I was 16 and 17. It was just a relief to get rid of the past. I was growing up and just wanted to get rid of the old baggage.

Likewise, consider the following quote from Laura (WF 21), who moved out of the family house to validate her role transition from “child” to “adult:”

L:...I decided that I was 18 or 19 and it was time to move out. I waited until I could save up enough money, I knew I had to leave. My parents were driving me crazy. Having to be in at a certain time was driving me crazy....I wanted to be away from Mom and Dad....It felt good. I liked the freedom. I liked the responsibility.

Finally, consider Allison's (WF 21) disposition of a pair of dance shoes, a favorite remembrance of high school performances:

A: I had these shoes for years and years. I did dancing in high school. These were my favorite shoes. But then I was in West Side Story and I danced so much, I just wore them out....I had to throw them away. But I didn’t throw them away until a year or two later. I put them on every once in awhile just to think about the show and stuff, but I knew they were ruined and I knew I wasn’t going to dance anymore.

Steven, Liz, Laura, and Allison are all describing possession disposition related to role transitions from “childhood” to “adulthood;” a major life change in which “props” are extremely important (e.g., Bryman, Bytheway, Allatt, and Keil 1987; Mercer, Nichols, and Doyle 1989; Middleton 1970).

In contrast, consider Stephanie's (WF 25) recent divorce, a well-recognized role transition in and of itself:

S: So Dick and I weren’t talking because we got in a fight...and then Dick said...I was the worst thing in his life...He moved out. I was really mad. I supported him while he finished his Master’s degree here, but then he wouldn’t get a job. Then, as soon as we broke up...all of a sudden he was Assistant Superintendent of the County’s Budget Management Office. So he told me he couldn’t get a job and he got one right after we got divorced. It was like he was pushing me to see how far he could go.

Similarly, consider Susan's (WF 23) break-up with a long-term boyfriend, and her consequential destruction of a plaque she made for him:

S: The plaque was a collage-type of plaque. I had been cutting things out of...magazines. Things that were special. Remembrances from our relationship. I even had a picture of us....I had given it to him, but later found him with another girl one time, so I took the plaque back thinking that he was not worthy of it. I was so mad over the relationship and there wasn’t really anything I could do about it. The plaque really wasn’t made for me, but I didn’t want to give back to him because I thought it was too good for him, so I broke it, and then I gave it back to him.

Both Stephanie and Susan describe common role strain (e.g., Allatt, Keil, Bryman, and Bytheway 1987; Bryman, Bytheway, Allatt, and Keil 1987; Mercer, Nichols, and Doyle 1989) during and following transitions that required changes from wife or girlfriend to single, unattached adults.
Now consider a mid-life transition, as Teresa (BF 37) explains her decision to quit her job and return to school:

T: I worked for the telephone company for fifteen years and I was in management. It was during the time of the divestiture so there was a lot of talk that they were going to be downsizing the management team. The criteria for deciding who was going to stay and who was going to be terminated was based on education and degrees. I knew I was going to lose my job because I didn't have a degree and I decided to never lose another job because I didn't have a degree so I went to school to get a degree.

There are two particularly interesting aspects in this interview excerpt. First, Teresa provides an example to illustrate that role transitions occur throughout life (e.g., Eurih 1981; George 1980; Riley, Huber, and Hess 1988). Next, this interview quote discusses the cyclic consumption process of acquisition, usage, and disposition (Young and Wallendorf 1989) as Teresa explains how she "disposed of" her role as a manager and "acquired" the role of a student.

Thus far, all included dispositional stories related to role transitions have been voluntary. Next I list two interview excerpts related to involuntary role transitions; that is, role transitions that were forced upon the informants. Consider, for instance, how Jack's (WM 24) parents' divorce represented a role transition not only for his parents, but for himself as well:

J: Well, my parents were getting a divorce and I was 17. When my parents got divorced, my mom got the house and my dad had to move out. I wanted to live with my dad so I had to move. It was my choice to live with my dad, but I had no choice about moving out of the house. Because of the bad feelings, I felt like I had to leave. I was mad at my mom. I was mad at the fact that everything was being broke up. I guess I was rejecting her... She [was] willing to have me stay. [If] I had gotten over the anger, I could have stayed, but because of my emotions, I felt forced to leave... [I] felt sadness about leaving because I had lived there... my whole life.

Similarly, consider Paul's (WM 22) story of the death of his father when he was 15 years old:

P: My father... was killed by a drunk driver...

I:... How did you feel?

P: I don't know. I was shocked. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what was going on. It was really weird... I felt a great loss. I was still in disbelief.... The thing that bugged me the most was that everyone kept saying that everything was going to be the same and I couldn't believe that. My mom changed a lot. Her attitude was really different. It wasn't like she was the same person. I don't know. It was really strange. Me and my brother did not get along with my mom... It seemed like she didn't want me to have any responsibility. I don't know. She just seemed to neglect us a lot more... It was like she was in her own little world. It was really strange. It wasn't just with her kids, it was with her friends and everything. It was this one friend of my dad's, not a really close friend, a good friend, but not one that my father would say was one of his better friends, kind of like seemed to come to my mom's aid and she kind of like took it like he was the only one that was willing to help and she was caught up in it and it seemed like he manipulated her a lot. I felt anger toward that in particular. It seemed like he was more important that me, my brother, and my sister.

I: As a 15 year old boy who was closest to your father and having your father suddenly die like that, how do you think it influenced your life or changed your life from what it might have been?

P:... If my father was still alive I would probably go to school at home. I said I don't get along well with my mom. I left... I moved to California... [For] some reason, my mom did a complete reversal after that, and from what my brother said, she totally changed. So I don't know. I don't think I would be an independent as I am.

Jack and Paul both discuss common role transitions--divorce and death--but from the perspectives of outsiders affected by uncontrollable events rather than from the viewpoints of inside participants. Nonetheless, they behave as if they were the people divorcing and dying--or perhaps even worse--due to the uncontrollable circumstances of their respective dispositional experiences.

DISCUSSION

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar...

"I--I hardly know, Sir, just at present,"

Alice replied rather shyly, "at least I know

who I was when I got up this morning, but I

think I must have changed several times since then."

Lewis Carroll

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Role transitions usually have dramatic effects on self-identity and social identity: They represent changes in the plays, parts, scripts, and props in our lives. Similar to professional actors and actresses, we typically prefer certain plays, feel more comfortable with favorite parts, perform most effectively with unchanging scripts, and rely upon familiar props to guide our performances. My objective has been to provide some examples of this dramaturgic metaphor as seen in real drama, where life itself is the theater, stage, setting, and scene, and we create the plot (or have the plot created) as we proceed.

My initial examples involve the disposition of unwanted or inappropriate "props" such as a security blanket, a car, a place of residence, and a pair of shoes. These possession dispositions facilitated movement to new plays, parts, scripts, and plots. My next examples involve the disposition of other "parts" in plays; specifically a husband, a boyfriend, and a job. Finally, I describe involuntary dispositional experiences such as parental divorce and the death of a parent, and illustrate how these events trigger disturbing changes in plays, parts, scripts, and plots.

Thus, if we--as researchers of consumer behavior--believe "All the world's a stage..." then we must study that stage if we desire to understand changes in the social systems, social roles, normative and anticipatory role expectations, and--most especially--the possessions on it. And, as implied, we will discover that the acquisition, usage, and disposition of possessions serve vital functions for the performers as they enact their roles and role transitions.
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Role Transition. As of Oracle Database 12c Release 2 (12.2.0.1), when a physical standby database is converted into a primary you have the option to keep any sessions connected to the physical standby connected, without disruption, during the switchover/failover. To enable this feature, set the STANDBY_DB_PRESERVE_STATES initialization parameter in your init.ora file before the standby instance is started. Performing Role Transitions Using Old Syntax for information about the procedures used in prior releases, and a comparison of old and new syntax. Oracle Database Reference for a complete description of the STANDBY_DB_PRESERVE_STATES initialization parameter. The transition from the work role of a career Navy enlisted man to that of a worker in the civilian economy can be problematic for individual and interpersonal reasons (McCall & Simmons, 1978). On...Â Social Support Role Transition Transition Group Role Ambiguity Supervisor Support. These keywords were added by machine and not by the authors. This process is experimental and the keywords may be updated as the learning algorithm improves.